

Ohji Kouji
おおじ こうじ
Illustration / 西屋太志
Nishiya Futoshi

△△△スピード!

High Speed!



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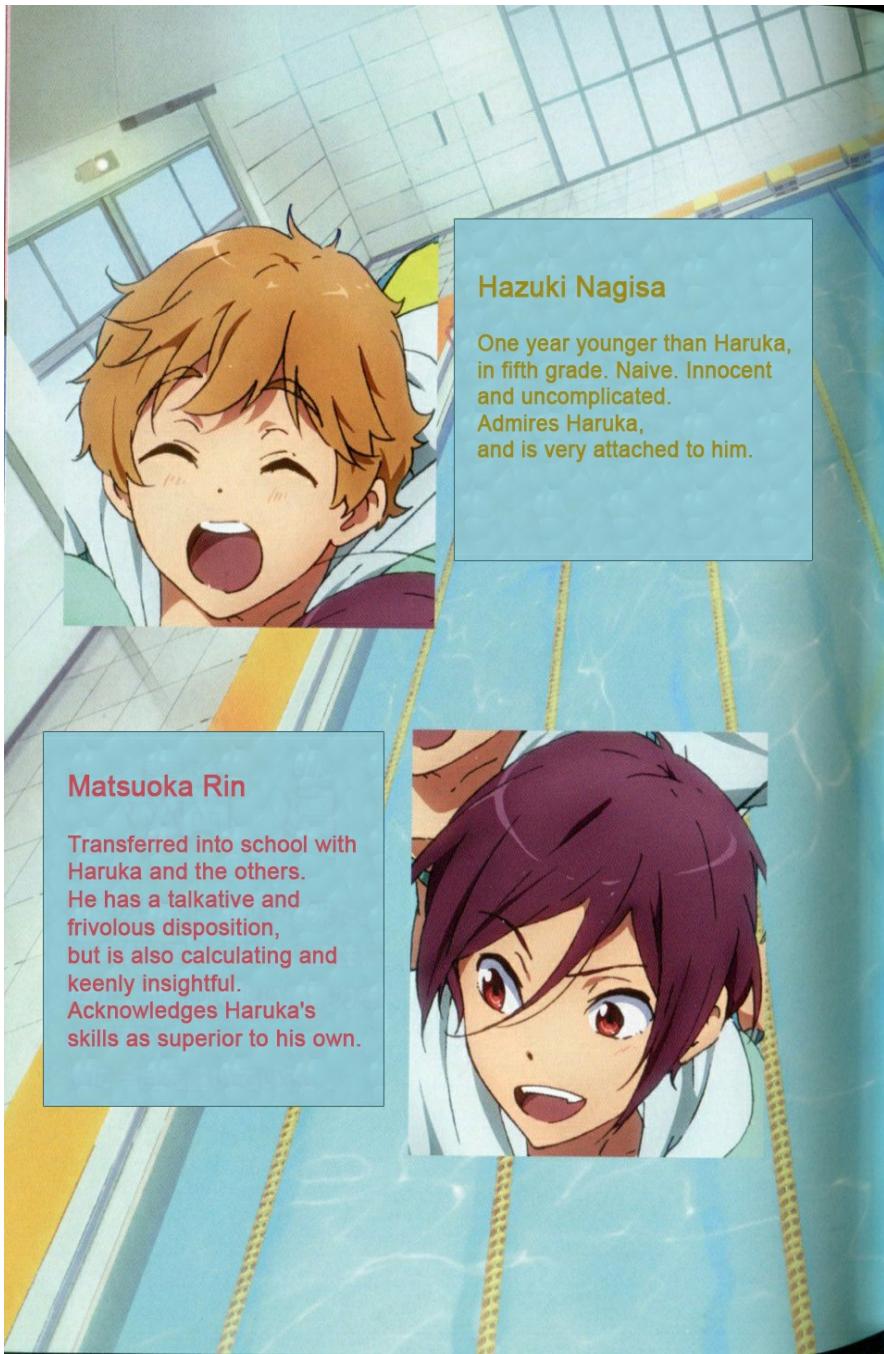
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Nanase Haruka

Unsociable and expressionless, but gives off a sense of great energy. He is fixated on freestyle, and will not swim anything else. His stroke is refined and beautiful.



Tachibana Makoto

Haruka's best friend since childhood. Cheerful, kind-hearted and thoughtful, he often tries to mother-hen over Haruka. He tends to go all-out when swimming.



「君、たしか佐野SCの
松岡君だよね」

"You're Matsuoka-kun
from Sano SC,
aren't you?"

"You're fast. Are you really
a grade-schooler?"

「速いな。
ほんと「小学生？」

Translation: sunnyskies.dreamwidth.org

Translation: sunnyskies.dreamwidth.org

Rin had never seen anyone
that terrified by something before.





ハル、

ハル！

Haru,
Haru!



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『ハイ☆スピード！』を加筆・修正したものです。

High☆Speed!

by Kōji Ōji

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Chapter One: Swim

The water is alive. Even when you gently touch the water's surface, the faint ripples don't go unnoticed, it lies in wait with bated breath for its prey. Then, once you leap in with a splash, it suddenly attacks you with its fangs bared. Coiling around your body, it snatches away the freedom of your hands and feet. The more you fight against it, the more persistently it coils around you, before long you end up exhausting all your physical strength.

However, if you don't fight against it and go in with your stance prepared, the water gently calms down. Creating a rift by piercing the water's surface with your fingertips in that stance, your body slowly slips into it. Your arms, your head, your chest, your stomach and then your feet.

Instead of rejecting the water, you accept it. Instead of denying it, you mutually recognize each other's existence. The important thing is to feel the water. To feel it in your heart. Then, to trust what you felt. To believe in yourself.

Haruka raised his head from the water, touching the wall of the pool. Even though he swam 1000m in forward crawl, not a single breath was labored. As he took off his goggles, a hand reached out for him. He glanced up, following the hand. Makoto looked down on Haruka with a friendly smile.

For an elementary school 6th grader, he had fairly large body. Solidly built shoulders and above that, an unbalancedly childish face. And, eyebrows in the shape of an eight (八), like a good person. That, is Tachibana Makoto.

When Haruka grabbed his hand, he pulled him up with such strength that you couldn't have imagined from that eight-shaped eyebrow's smile.

"You swam as gracefully as usual. Just like a dolphin, Haru-chan."

"It's about time you stop calling me with '-chan'."

He wasn't as tall as Makoto, but his tensed up, narrow body gave off a sense of strong energy without being too muscular. And, a gaze that seemed to be looking somewhere far away. That, is Nanase Haruka.

It's been three years since the two of them had started frequenting the Iwatobi Swimming Club. Makoto was the one who had suggested going there, Haruka just went along with him, and that's the kind of impression they gave off even now.

Their common points are that they're 6th graders in the same school and that they attend the same swimming club. And one more. They both have girlish names.

It's not the case for Makoto, but Haruka was hung up about that last point. He hated being teased for his name the most, in front of people he tried only saying his family name as much as possible. Even so, when he had to say his full name, he had a habit of always deliberately looking down and mumbling it. Whenever Makoto saw him doing that, he wore an amused expression.

"Alright. So, are you done for the day, Haru?"

Ever since kindergarten, he called him Haru-chan and he called him Makoto. Just by changing the way they called each other, it felt like even the relation between them had changed.

"Hey, you don't have to say my name after every sentence. Besides, call me by family name instead." He wasn't angry, but he said it in a blunt, commanding tone. This happened all the time. Acting like it didn't bother him, Makoto replied with a smile.

"But Haru, you call me Makoto. Then, should I call you Haruka?" He shrugged his shoulders at the unfamiliar naming.

"If you call me that, I won't talk to you anymore."

"Then, Haru it is."

It was always like that. No matter how strong a tone he tried using to suppress him, no matter how much he tried resisting, in the end he got caught up in Makoto's pace. It was Haruka's habit to silently turn to the side at those times. Saying that any further arguing was a drag, it didn't mean that he completely surrendered. In Haruka's case, it showed on his attitude, he started to silently turn to the side.

Makoto put on his goggles and stood on the starting block, diving in no time. Then, he raised huge splashes on the water's surface. Unlike Haruka, he forcibly plunged forward in the water with wild strokes and kicks that seemed to strike. Just like a ferocious killer whole pursuing its prey.

Haruka walked to the shower room without even waiting around to see Makoto arrive at the 50m wall.

— Because of Makoto, I want to hurry and wash off the lukewarm water.

Only thinking of that, he took off his cap and left to get undressed.

The poplar trees' branches made a sound as the north wind blew through them. Since not a single leaf remained on them to fall, the trees' voice trembled like old people begging for forgiveness.

From Iwatobi Elementary School's main gate, the road lined with poplar trees stretched straight ahead, on one side it was split into two wide traffic lanes that few cars passed on, the street only continued until the next intersection. Since there were barely any obstacles, they had to walk against the wind in the winter. Then, the children going there became reticent as they decidedly narrowed their shoulders.

When Matsuoka Rin transferred in, it was that season just as the year began.

"I'm Matsuoka Rin. I came from Sano Elementary School. It's a girlish name but I'm properly a man. Nice to meet you."

The classroom became still like it was hit with water. The new friend at the front, maybe he's nervous. Or has he always been an obedient honor student. They thought that for a moment, the silence turned into a commotion in an instant.

It was a natural reaction, considering that a 6th grader transferred in January, that is to say out of season, and on top of that one with a girlish name. Thinking that, Rin was looking around the classroom when a boy stood up.

"Matsuoka-kun."

Tachibana Makoto. With a friendly smile, he happily looked at Rin. He already knew that he'd be at this school.

"Tachibana....-kun. So we're in the same class."

"Yeah, that's right. Haru-cha.....I mean, Haru's with us, too. "

Makoto looked to the side, turning his neck. He glanced at Haruka, who was expressionlessly staring at Rin.

"I see, Nanase....-kun is here, too."

Nanase Haruka. Appearing to be blunt as usual. He knew that he was here, but he didn't think that they'd be in the same class.

The common points about the three of them are that they're 6th graders, they swim and they have girlish names. And now they have one more, with being in the same class. The

class began to stir again. The commotion was about what sort of relation the three of them have. The mystery became a target of their inquisitiveness, it completely drew in everyone's interest.

During recess, it was not an unusual sight that the classmates gathered around the transfer student. In a way, you could even say that it was the transfer student's destiny. Meeting the barrage of questions, he was thoroughly questioned to the point of baring himself to them. You could almost say that even close friends don't know as much about each other as they made him talk. That said, for things to go well for a transfer student, the first impression is important. They have to answer clearly with a smile, no matter the question.

But, as one would expect by the 3rd recess, they started to get a little tired of it. Then, by lunch time, those who finished their lunches gathered in a line again.

— Well, let's start the second half of today's battle.

Preparing himself like that, when he was taking a deep breath, someone put a hand on Rin's shoulder. Even though there wasn't that much force in it, sensing a strong energy coming from, he grimaced a little. He knew without having to turn around. It's Haruka—. It was impossible to think that anyone apart from Haruka could do that in the class.

"Come with me for a bit."

Only saying that, he walked ahead by himself. Those who saw him stand up were shocked by Haruka's pushiness, took a breath. Though it was the kind of scene where he wanted to spread both his hands like a foreigner, he thought that such a pretentious pose would surely be unfitting for transfer student, he stopped. Not knowing what to do, as he was staring at Haruka's retreating figure for a while, unexpectedly he was lightly pushed forward from behind.

"What are you doing? You'll be left behind."

Makoto's smile slipped through beside Rin.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going."

Sensing someone's eyes on him, as he looked around himself, everyone in the class was staring back and forth between the three of them, their gazes full of curiosity. He thought that it was a good thing he didn't do the pretentious pose after all. To escape from those stares, Rin hurried after Makoto.

Haruka's feet stopped between the school building and the pool. In the cold winter

weather, the large cherry blossom tree spread its branches without flowers or leaves. It seemed as if it were searching for something, vigorously stretching towards the tall sky. They say that the cherry blossom was there long before the school was built.

Rin raised his out of tune voice.

"Woah, this tree's amazing. Is it a cherry blossom?"

It's a cherry blossom. Haruka thought that, but didn't say it.

"It's a cherry blossom."

He knew that Makoto would answer that.

Rin placed his hand on the treetrunk, tracing a complicated branch as he looked up at the sky.

"When spring comes and the cherry blossoms fall, they'll fall into that pool over there, won't they."

Haruka and Makoto looked at the pool. Since it hasn't been maintained, the fallen dead leaves were spread out all over it.

"I wanna try swimming in it, a pool of cherry blossoms."

Rin said it strangely filled with emotion, Makoto intently stared at his face.

"That's impossible, the water will still be cold then. I think it's better to wait for summer to swim after all."

Rin was shocked.

"Do you plan on staying here next year?"

That voice overlapped with the sound of the branches blown by the north wind, drowning out the end of it.

Rin took his hand off the tree and put it in his pocket.

"What is it, calling me out to a place like this. Do you leave the transfer student tied up on the first day?"

After he said that, Rin burst out in laughter. Lured by out, Makoto laughed, too. When he saw Haruka looking at him with cold eyes, Makoto lightly cleared his throat and turned towards Rin.

"No, Matsuoka-kun. Jokes aside, there's something we want to ask."

Before Makoto could finish, Rin interrupted him.

"A coincidence, it's really a coincidence. We happened to move here and I ended up at this school. I was surprised, too. I never would've thought that I'd be in the same class as Tachibana and Nanase. Really, coincidences are scary, aren't they."

They've met Rin several times at the town competitions. That was all the connection they had. It's not like they were particularly close, they haven't even really had a proper conversation.

March of last year—. Rin was the one to call out to them first.

"You sure are fast. Are you really in elementary school? "

They couldn't tell if he spoke to Haruka or Makoto, in that case, so Makoto replied for now.

"You, you're Matsuoka-kun from Sano, right?"

He remembered how happy Rin looked when he said that to him.

"Ohh, so you knew that."

That was from the first town competition that they participated in. Haruka competed in the 100m free, Makoto in the 100m breaststroke and they both won their respective races, but in the 50m races, Sano SC took the win in both. By Rin from Sano SC on his own.

"There are only long lanes today, but I'm sure I could win on 100m if it were on a short lane."

It didn't sound like he was being a sore loser or putting up a front. They thought that it was probably just as he said. Haruka and Makoto both let Rin ahead at the start. It was at the 70m mark, after the turn, that they passed him by.

Even though Haruka won, he didn't seem happy about it. He didn't care about losing or winning. He never once swam for the sake of winning. Still, he felt unusually irritated at the difference in starting.

When Haruka reached the goal after overtaking Rin, Makoto was as pleased about it as if he had done so.

"Congratulations. It's amazing, you won."

Even though you won, too. That's what he thought, but he said something else instead.

"Who was that?"

"Matsuoka Rin from Sano SC, apparently."

He realized that it was a name he already knew, he said so because he knew, he didn't really have a reason for that. It's just that he wanted to remember it. The person who irritated him. His figure as he lied down, chest heaving up and down with his goggles still on.

Maybe he's crying. He disappeared from his field of vision for just one moment, thinking that, Haruka turned his back towards Rin.

It was afterwards that Rin had called out to them. They talked during the short period of time until the awards ceremony.

"I'll have to get stronger, too."

He was the same height as Haruka, but he was well-proportioned, his physique was indeed suited for swimming races.

"I don't think it's just strength, though."

Haruka told him. There wasn't a single time when he relied on physical strength for swimming. Then, he left the follow-up to Makoto as usual.

"Matsuoka-kun's start dash is amazing. I was surprised by how you jumped in like that."

"Hey, Rin. The awards ceremony is gonna start."

A lanky person called for Rin from afar.

"Alright, Sousuke. I'll be right there."

After Rin replied, he turned back towards them.

"I won't lose next time. Let's swim again sometime."

Rin lightly raised his hand as he left and Makoto reciprocated it with a smile.

"We'll try our best so that we don't lose to you, either. Ah, look, the awards ceremony is starting."

Saying that, he pushed Haruka's back.

That was their meeting with Rin. After that, they kept meeting at competitions.

A sudden gust stirred the cherry blossom's branches, it let out a scream as it made a huge bend. A cloud of dust whirled, the three of them closed their eyes as a reflex. It only lasted for a moment, but the whirlwind was so strong that they couldn't breathe as it passed them. The whirlwind clad in a cloud of dust howled as it jumped around in the schoolyard, violently spinning around as it pleased, it rolled around the swirl. Looking at the wind, Rin spit out some sand.

"What was with that wind. The sand went into my mouth. Does it always blow like that around here?"

He said that and spat again.

"Winds like that don't blow. I thought it was going to blow us away. Let's go back to the school building, Haru."

Before he was done saying that, Makoto's feet led him towards the school building. The other children playing in the schoolyard who were chased by the wind also headed towards the school building to take refuge.

He didn't come here to show off the cherry blossom tree. He hasn't asked anything yet, he still doesn't know anything. Thinking the wind had tricked him, it felt like too much. He doesn't know if Rin's transfer was a coincidence or not. But it was easy to imagine that it was going to have an effect on Haruka and Makoto. Whatever kind of shape it'll take, it'll surely be a troublesome thing.

He was sorry that they got caught up in it. So that's why he called Rin out, thinking that he could warn him in advance. But he thought that it'd be too much to trouble to keep pursuing it. The more he fussed about it, the more he'll end up getting affected by it.

Taking his gaze off Rin heading towards the school building, Haruka looked up at the cherry blossom tree bent by the wind once more.

Chapter Two: Water

Looking down on the small fishing harbor, atop a slightly elevated mountain was Misagozaki Shrine. Halfway up the stone steps on the road approaching the shrine, there is a single torii [Shinto shrine archway] with a chouzuya [hand-washing pavilion] placed beside it, at the top of the stone steps await two torii with the shrine grounds behind them. Right at the back of the grounds, the view from Misagozaki Shrine as the sea spread out with the diffused sunlight reflecting off of it, was so magnificent that poets had written poems about it since ancient times. Since there are few plains, the port city's village is small, the houses are built so crowded together that their walls are close enough to touch. Surrounded by the sea and the mountain from every direction, since there was only one road that served as a means of communication with the outside, the village of Iwatobi formed a solitary island on land. The village not only covered the plains, but also reached the slope of the mountain and until the woodland paths, the stone steps leading to Misagozaki Shrine were held between houses lined up on both sides.

Although the shrine burdened with history had a faded blue color, its magnificent appearance was overflowing with dignity, various refined ceremonies were held there. When autumn comes, there is a lively festival where they run down the flight of stone steps with the portable shrine taken from the main shrine without stopping, after they go a lap around the port, they go with it into the sea as it is. Even though it's supposed to be a festival to show their gratitude for the abundant harvest, why is that they go into the sea, the only way to answer is because it's a fishing village after all. This shrine overlooking the port is inevitably burdened with the duty of watching over the safety of fishing. That's why all the fishermen clap their hands in prayer on their boats when they go out to sea. In other words, Misagozaki Shrine rules over the blessing of abundant harvests and safe big catches, at times it even takes care of easy childbirth and academic accomplishment, it's a shrine that worships an appreciated yet busy god.

Haruka's house was at the halfway point of the stone steps leading to Misagozaki Shrine, breaking off to the left of the single torii where the chouzuya is. That's why, no matter where he went, he always had to go up and down the flight of stone steps. There were other streets, but the haphazardly built flood of houses made it complicated, since it became like a thin maze, so it was certainly faster to descend on the shrine's stone steps than to navigate through them. So he left his bicycle at the bottom of the steps.

He goes to the swimming club by bicycle after getting home. After getting home from school, Haruka squeezed the necessary things into his bag and immediately opened the front door again. After he's reached the bottom of the steps, he looks up at Makoto's house. Makoto's house is on the other side of the ones holding the steps between them,

the stairs leading to the entrance reached down to where the shrine's stone steps descended.

In most cases, with this timing he joined up with Makoto's smiling face, but he seemed to be late today. It's not like they especially made a promise and it's not like he needed to wait for him either. Makoto has a younger brother and sister who go to kindergarten, he often had to take them by hand. Straddling the bike as it is, he put his foot on the pedal. He could catch up on the way and they were going to see each other at the swimming club anyways. Rather than getting irritated while waiting, it put both of them at ease if he just quickly went on his way.

Haruka looked up at the stairs leading to Makoto's house just one more time, then put his strength into the pedal.

It takes about 10 minutes to reach the swimming club. On the way, it crosses a class A river called Shiwagawa. In the winter, the wind always blew through alongside the river. Going across the large bridge called Mutsukibashi that spans across it, running beside the embankment for a short while, the sound of the waves can be heard instantly. At the bay port, the white fishing boats anchoring close together, it indicated that that's where the fishing village is. While taking a sidelong glance at the many white masts shaking on the waves, after having passed through the harbor is Iwatobi SC.

After having passed through Iwatobi's village, Haruka approached Mutsukibashi. As he begins to cross the bridge, the wind blows him to the side, he instinctively grimaces. It blew a lot stronger today. Shaken by the strong wind, when he reached the middle of the bridge, Yazaki Aki's figure looked small, listlessly standing still. For some reason, she stopped her bike and she seemed to be peering down at the river's surface.

In the same class, she goes to Iwatobi SC. That's their common point with Haruka.

When he got closer, he could clearly see Aki's troubled expression. Should I pass by silently? Or would it be better to say something? A little hesitantly, he turned around but it didn't seem like Makoto was coming yet.

— What am I hesitating over such a boring thing for? Why am I counting on Makoto?

When he was clicking his tongue at himself in his mind, Aki noticed Haruka and faced him with a depressed smile.

"Ah, Nanase-kun."

"Hey. What happened?"

Grasping the breaks, he stops in front of Aki.

"Yeah, my scarf..."

Saying that, Aki glances down at the river. Beyond that glance was a washed away white scarf, drifting. For a class A river, Shiwigawa was a fairly wide one. The scarf flowed to a place where you couldn't possibly reach it even after crossing the bridge and going down to the embankment.

"It's impossible. No choice but to give it up."

Did that sound cold? It bothers me a little after saying it, but in reality there's nothing to be done.

"Yeah... ..."

Even if she understands that it's impossible, maybe she can't accept it. Aki kept looking at the drifting scarf. Haruka looked away from Aki's expression that was unlike her usual self and stepped on the pedal.

"I'm going ahead."

"Okay."

Before Aki had replied, Haruka started pedaling. Feeling it on his back that Aki's figure was getting distant, he crosses over Mutsukibashi. Hurrying along the embankment beside the river, the drifting white scarf kept appearing and disappearing at the edge of his vision. Haruka looked away from the river and rode his bicycle towards Iwatobi SC.

Makoto arrived in the changing room when Haruka was putting on his goggles.

"Sorry, Haru. As I was leaving, the goldfish bowl was dirty, so I cleaned it a little. That's why I was late."

— You could've done that after you got home.

While he was looking at Makoto with eyes like that as he started to change, suddenly, a thought about Aki passed through a corner of his mind. Was Aki still there when Makoto crossed the bridge?

"Earlier, on the bridge..."

He began to say, but thinking that it doesn't matter, he stopped.

"What? What happened with the bridge?"

"No, never mind."

"Speaking of which, I met up with Zaki-chan where I crossed the bridge. She didn't seem too well."

He called her with a nickname, 'Zaki'. It's like he combined 'Yazaki' and 'Aki'. Makoto calls her with '-chan' added to it.

"Apparently, she dropped her scarf."

"Ah, I see. The bridge's wind sure is strong."

— Did he know?

He said that she dropped it, but he didn't say that the wind was strong. She could've lost it by dropping it on the way, rather, that would be natural. So that means Makoto was pretending that he didn't hear it from Aki. Perhaps she could've also told him that Haruka acted cold towards her. Because of that, is he planning to scold Haruka?

Either way, it's a boring matter. He didn't intend to continue the conversation any longer.

"I'm going ahead."

"Okay."

Haruka left the changing room.

"I'm Matsuoka Rin. I came from Sano SC. It's a girlish name but I'm properly a man. Nice to meet you."

As expected, that's enough. It's nothing to be surprised over a second time. This was the only swimming club in the area. There was no longer a reason to be concerned with what Rin was doing. It's fine as long as they like him. He was sorry for the trouble.

"Oh no, the coincidences are piling up, huh. Even being in the same swimming club, after transferring schools."

He didn't have to deal with this foolishness. Leaving the rest up to Makoto, he dives into the pool.

Creating a rift in the water with his fingertips, he slips into it. From arms to head, chest, stomach, then feet. He doesn't use all his force, nor does he surrender himself. Accepted by the water, then accepting it. They both accept each other's existence. You don't

exclude each other. You don't become one body. While being of different qualities from the start, a relation continues without denying each other. That's what swimming meant to Haruka.

When he's in the water, he's released from the troublesome things. The ripples that rose in his heart, he feels them quietly calming down. Rin, Aki, the scarf, the wind. It's not like he ends up forgetting about them, but he's released from them for just a little while.

After swimming 1000m forward crawl, he raised his head. As if he was waiting for it, Makoto's hand reached for him from the poolside.

"Good job."

He doesn't swim in a way that's tiring. Rather, Makoto is the one short of breath. Perhaps he just swam 1000m, too. What's more, with all his possible strength.

It's been like that since a long time ago. When Makoto swims, he never eases up. His way of swimming never seems like it's flowing. He's never asked why, nor has he thought of asking.

"What about him?"

As Makoto pulled him up by the hand, he asked about Rin.

"He's swimming. Look, over there."

In the lane on the end, he was repeating strokes to check the water's sensation. After he confirmed that, Haruka started walking.

"I'll do the short lane from the other side, so measure my time for me."

He didn't care about the time. He just wanted to be a little bit farther away from Rin. He was sorry for getting caught up in the trouble. More than himself, he didn't want Makoto getting involved. If Makoto were to get involved, eventually it would surely happen to Haruka, too. He could affirm that much.

Not even minding that Makoto opened both his arms and wore an amazed expression, Haruka kept walking towards the pool with the short lane.

After easily finishing a 1000m swim in forward crawl, when Rin raised his head, a boy with big round eyes like a small animal's was peering at him from above. With eyes that looked like he was searching for a water strider or a crayfish, he looked down on Rin without even blinking.

"What?"

He peers back at him from below.

"Matsuoka-kun, are you Nanase-kun's friend?"

He stares straight at him.

"Rather than friends, I guess we're rivals."

"What's a rival? Is it putting on airs while boasting?"

Not a single blink.

"It means that we compete against each other."

Looking away as he spoke, he got up on the poolside. Staring at each other for so long, it felt like they were peeking into the depth of their eyes.

"Who's faster, you or Nanase-kun?"

"I'd say I am at 50m, Nanase at 100m."

When Rin stood up, so did the boy. He thinks he has a pretty delicate build. He's probably a 4th grader.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why is it that you're fast at 50m, but slow at 100m? Ah, I know. You can only swim 50m, huh. Is it because you run out of breath? Should I teach you?"

"No thanks! I can properly swim 100m and I don't run out of breath either."

"Hehe, the best I've ever swum is 500m, you know. Because of that, I've been in the swimming race course since January. Bure is the one I'm best at, ah, bure is the breaststroke. I'm the only one in my class who can swim 500m, you know."

"By class, you mean at school?"

"Yeah, 5th grade 3rd class."

What a boastful talk he's caught up in. Rin took off his goggles and looked around for Haruka and Makoto.

"Hey, Matsuoka-kun, which one is your best?"

"All of them."

"By all of the them, you mean even batta?"

Butterfly is the last one they learn out of the 4 types of swimming. If they just got to the swimming race course, they probably don't know how to swim it well enough yet.

"Batta and bakku and free and bure. Also, I'm the best of the best at dog paddle."

Where could they have disappeared off to, he can't find Haruka nor Makoto.

"That's amazing. You can swim konme, then."

"I can."

He's been doing individual medley since 3rd grade. It's nothing to boast about. It's starting to get pretty annoying. He's at his limit for being stared at with big round eyes, too.

"I'm Hazuki Nagisa. Hey Matsuoka-kun, take a look at my batta. Somehow, I can't go straight ahead with it."

"Your elbow curves. You can't keep a high elbow. You're not using your back."

There's Makoto. He's keeping time at the short line. Then, Haruka is the one swimming.

"Eeh, you haven't even seen it yet, don't just say things on the spot."

"You're so noisy. Even without seeing it, that's about... ..."

Nagisa's eyes became teary.

"Don't say I'm being noisy. Take a proper look."

With tears still in his eyes, he kept looking straight at Rin. It'd be bothersome to make him cry in a place like this.

"Al-alright. I'll look at it."

Suddenly, Nagisa switched to a huge smile on his face.

"Really? Then, I'll swim here."

After he put on his goggles, he dove into the lane that Rin was swimming in earlier. First

of all, it would be better if he relearned the dive from the basics. It couldn't even be called a butterfly. It was just as he had pointed it out previously. This is probably what swimming 'batta' is like. It would be better to call it grass hopper instead of butterfly. In a sense, it's a new way of swimming.

He felt a shiver. Will he have to take a look at it for him every time? Will he always have to tag along with the big round eyed kid until he learns how to properly swim? He couldn't help but feel like that's how it'll end up.

As for the bad feeling he had up until now, while recalling that there was almost a 100% chance that he was right on the mark, Rin gazed at Nagisa's grasshopper without really looking at it.

"Right, that's all for today. You've sure gotten a lot better."

When Rin said that, while he was harshly breathing in the water, a joyful look surfaced on Nagisa's face.

"Really? I've gotten better?"

— Yeah, you got better. At the 'grasshopper swim', that is.

"Hurry on out. I'll show you something good."

"What is it, what is it?"

Nagisa climbed up onto the poolside, his eyes filled with curiosity.

"This way, this way."

Beckoning to him, Rin jogged towards the short lane pool.

"Where are you going, Matsuoka-kun?"

"Earlier, you asked which one of us was faster, me or Nanase, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll show you right now."

Rin says it amusedly.

Running up to Makoto, he noticed Rin and turned around to face him.

"Ah, Matsuoka-kun."

He's holding a stopwatch in his hand. Haruka is swimming in the short lane. He's doing elegant forward crawl strokes over and over again.

"How many meters now?"

"Eh, the 50m turn... ..."

Haruka turns around with a quick turn. When Rin puts on his goggles, the rubber makes a sound as he snaps it while standing onto the starting block, he leapt into the lane beside him as he was.

Raising a splash, he cuts through the water with a dolphin kick. He starts doing strokes as he surfaces. At that point, there's a half body distance between him and Haruka.

— He sure is swimming carefreely. C'mon, just try and catch up!

Fiercely gaining on Haruka, they were completely lined up at 20m. Then, they made the quick turn at the same time. Rin stretches forward. He surfaces from the dolphin. He starts stroking. He feels Haruka's fingertips near his back.

Approaching the remaining 15m, Haruka's swimming changed. It's not because his turnaround got faster. Nor is it because he's putting in more strength. However, Rin knew that.

He feels it. The tremendous spirit, like a cluster of energy.

— There it is! C'mon. C'mon. Come closer!

Haruka bites at his shoulder, capturing Rin's head. 5m left.

— I'm getting overtaken. I'm getting overtaken. Like I'd let him overtake me!

His head lines up. Then, he touches the wall. Raising his head from the water, Rin shouts out to Makoto.

"Who is it!"

Nagisa was also there beside Makoto. They both pointed at Haruka at the same time. Haruka climbs out onto the poolside, his breathing undisturbed. It looked like it'll take a little longer for Rin to recover. The pressure to gain on Haruka inflicted a huge damage on him.

"So, Nanase's 100, how many seconds?"

Haruka took the stopwatch from Makoto, then gave it back to him. Then he walked away

like that.

Makoto answered Rin after looking at the stopwatch.

"It got reset."

Nagisa followed Haruka as he walked away.

"Nanase-kun, that was awesome. You looked so cool. Hey, hey, next time, teach me how to swim free."

Listening to Nagisa's voice getting farther away, Rin sunk his head in the water.

— He really is fast.

Rin murmured in the water, unable to hold back the excited feeling he was getting.

Throwing his bag on his shoulder, Haruka left the changing rooms and went into the lobby. The floor gave his feet a pleasantly cold feeling, making him realize that it was still winter. He thought about what happened earlier as he walked. Why did he end up getting so worked up over it?

He knew right away that it was Rin, just before he lined up for the turn. They swim in tournaments many times. He knows by the sensation of the ripples in the water. Besides, there's no one else in this club who challenges people to contests like that. The instant he knew, suddenly something started to boil. When he thought that the guy who senses the water more than he does is right in front of him, his body got hotter. Something hot flowed throughout his body. He couldn't keep the feeling down.

Even after he climbed up on the poolside, like an incomplete combustion had happened, he kept smoldering. When he thought that such a thing was in his body, he felt irritated and lost his motivation to swim. If he swam, it felt like he was being revived. Then, when he thought of the likes of Rin stirring up his emotions, he felt unpleasant about himself. Deeply regretting that he got provoked and completely joined in on it, Haruka left the pool behind.

Casually looking up at the break room's wall, it was decorated with the photos of the previous generations of members, lined up in a row. It's the group photo they take every year at the end of March. Though he knew that the photos were displayed, he never really felt like paying attention to them until now. Haruka was on two of them. He's standing near the end, with a bored expression.

Looking at them again, he realized that there were a lot of them. The oldest one was

from 23 years ago, compared to now, there were considerably few people on it. The boy in the middle was laughing, holding a trophy. He could read out '18th Tournament' on the medal hanging from their necks. It wasn't the only photo like that. On every photo, they were all laughing as they held a trophy or a shield.

This year, will they make me look like that, too? Thinking of that, he got a little fed up with it.

Going outside, the wind suddenly struck his cheeks.

— So it was still blowing.

Making a face like that, Haruka headed towards the bicycle racks.

"Wow, the wind sure is strong."

Makoto came from behind. He's the kind of guy who says whatever comes to his mind. Sometimes, he even says what Haruka's thinking instead of him. He's a meddlesome guy.

"Ah, what a swim that was."

Talking like he was an old man leaving the onsen, Rin came out of the club and started walking in a different direction than Haruka and Makoto. Seeing him, Makoto called out.

"Matsuoka-kun, the bicycle racks are this way."

"Nah, I don't have a bicycle yet."

"In that case, how about you get on behind me? I'll take you home."

He's saying something unnecessary again. It'd be better to just leave him alone.

Haruka kept walking, not caring about Makoto.

"It's fine. It's not that far away. See you tomorrow."

Saying it loud enough for Haruka to hear, Rin walked off in the opposite direction from the bicycle racks.

Quickly riding their bicycles through the fishing harbor, Haruka and Makoto came out at the Shiwagawa embankment. To cross Mutsukibashi, this was the only path they could take. Without even realizing it, Haruka looked at the water's surface. However, the scarf was nowhere to be found anymore. Maybe it sank, or maybe it floated to the sea.

Just before crossing the bridge, running while breathing out white puffs of air, Rin

caught up to them. His backpack roughly fixed over his training wear, he rhythmically kicked at the ground in white running shoes. His preparation for running was flawless. It's probably not just today, maybe he plans on commuting by running every day.

Haruka took his eyes off of Rin, clicking his tongue in his mind. And when he passed him, he stepped a little bit harder on the pedal.

He hears Makoto's voice from behind.

"How many kilometers to your house?"

"3 and a b....."

The wind snatched away Rin's voice.

The next morning, the wind blew against the row of poplar trees again. Although the sky was sunny, wondering where it could be blowing from, Haruka looked up at the clouds. Since he was looking up, changing his mind that there's no particular reason for the wind to blow because of the clouds, he buries his neck in his jacket.

In the morning, he always went to school alone. Since Makoto had to accompany his siblings who went to kindergarten to the bus stop, he always just barely made it. And then, he heads to school in a hurry. He can't go along with something like that.

He grimaces as the wind blows again. Though there were a lot of children who walked in a line, only the sound of the poplar trees trembling in the wind echoed with a strange voice.

Haruka didn't like this overly wide main road leading to the school. Especially in the winter, how everyone walked in groups stretching out was unpleasant for him. Then, when he thinks about how he's a part of it, too, he couldn't stand it sometimes. He ends up recalling a scene he saw from a long time ago. Although it's something from many years before, he still clearly remembers it. A freezing wind blew that time, too.

The clomping of the people clad in white kimonos using their canes was the only noise that resounded in the port. There were about 15 of them. They slowly and silently kept walking as they all had their eyes cast down. Although some of them were old people, children like him were also mixed in with them. Before he was aware of it, Haruka's eyes followed those children. Wearing white kimonos just like the other adults, while casting their eyes down, they were holding the hand of a little girl.

Could she be crying? Lightly grasping his fist while thinking that, that child raised her face and turned towards him. When her gaze met Haruka's, she wiped her eyes wet with tears with her left hand. Then, she firmly stared at Haruka with glaring eyes.

"Haru-chan, where are those people going?"

A young Makoto asked, trying to hide behind Haruka.

"Don't know."

"Then, what are they doing?"

There's no way he could know. He looked at Makoto instead of replying. Anxiously furrowing his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto tightly gripped just the edge of Haruka's clothes. As a voice that sounded like it was weeping escaped from somewhere in the line, Makoto's grip strengthens.

"Are you scared, Makoto?"

"Dunno. Are you, Haru-chan?"

He wasn't scared. It's just that their ominousness of unknown nature squirmed in his chest with a chill of unease. He doesn't know what this line is. But he was certain that it was something that frightened Makoto. Grabbing Makoto's hand, who was holding the edge of his clothes, Haruka ran far away from that line, far away as fast he could.

"Morning, Nanase-kun."

Suddenly being called out to, he ended up turning around, looking surprised. The unexpectedness had completely struck him by surprise. Once he realized that it was Aki, he got a little bothered as to how his reaction came out. But he only thought that for a moment, he instantly recovered his composure.

"Hey."

It was a blunt reply. That was usual for him, but he thought that this reply sounded particularly grouchy, even for him. In the first place, a bright greeting would've been appropriate. That's the way it is. However, Aki didn't mind that at all, she faced him with her usual, unchanging smile.

"Sorry about yesterday. I made you worry."

Is it about what happened on the bridge? It's the only thing that comes to mind. He doesn't even remember being all that worried. It was just that Aki's sunken expression

that was unlike her, had stuck in the corner of his memory a little.

"What happened to the scarf?"

Either way, since it fell into the middle of the wide river, there shouldn't be anything that could've been done. As soon as he said it, he thought it would've been better if he hadn't.

The dark shadow in Aki's expression from yesterday was no longer there. She smiled as pleasantly as the summer's blue sky.

"After Nanase-kun left, it sunk right away. Because of that, I had to accept it. If it would've kept getting washed away, I probably would've kept staring at it."

Saying that, she smiled pleasantly again. It was a smile that didn't suit this winter sky, or this road.

"What is it, Nanase-kun? Your face is red."

Suddenly, Aki peeks closer at Haruka's face. Their eyes meeting directly, just by looking slightly into the distance, he cast his eyes away.

"Nothing, it's normal."

"Don't you have a fever?"

As Aki's hand reached towards his face, Haruka instinctively brushed it away. Because of that, time stopped for a moment as the two of them faced each other. Aki looked at Haruka in surprise, holding the brushed-away hand in her other one.

"Ah.... my bad."

It was Haruka's mistake. If he doesn't like getting touched, it would've been better if he would've avoided it by moving his head or by lightly protecting himself with his hand. There was no need for him to brush away her hand.

"No, it's my fault..... sorry."

The conversation coming to a pause there, they started walking again on the road towards the school. Staying silent, looking down, while grimacing against the strong wind that blew sometimes.....

That was a perfectly appropriate state for walking on this poplar-lined road.

Homeroom's topic was about the "Graduation Commemoration Project". Gathering up the ideas that every class contributes, they narrow it down further to one of them. Since all the graduating students work together to create it afterwards, various opinions on it were given even in Haruka's class.

Things that could be made soon, things that didn't seem realizable at all, funny things, things that tended heavily towards preferences. By the time they gradually ran out of ideas, Aki raised her hand.

"Um, it's something I've been thinking about for a while now, but the only flowers that bloom at this school are cherry blossoms, right? That cherry blossom tree has a lot of blossoms on it when spring comes, but since it looks a little lonely....."

It's the large cherry blossom tree that stands between the school building and the pool. In this area, another splendid tree like that isn't to be found. With an overwhelming presence that no kind of person can get close to, the trees, the grass, the flowers, stay far away from it, like they were overpowered.

"And so I've been thinking, what if we planted a flowerbed around that cherry blossom? When spring comes, I think it'd surely be lovely if the tree and the multicolored flowers could get along and bloom together."

Haruka felt a faint opposition. The cherry blossom has to stay taller, bigger, more dignified than anyone else and with an air of calm about it. He didn't even want to imagine its figure surrounded by flashy flowers.

"I agree with planting a flowerbed, too."

The one who backed Aki's idea by saying that, was Makoto.

"I think it would be good to plant flowers that would bloom around the time we graduate."

You can't say that the majority rule vote is always fair. Unrelated to the strength of feelings, every person is given the right to one vote of equal value. If that's the case, bringing attention to the strength of those feelings like Aki and Makoto, it's fine if they're seeking understanding, but Haruka couldn't do that. Pushing his feelings onto others is what Haruka was the worst at doing.

But it's always like that, Aki's idea is generally supported. And then, they decided on the flowerbed with an overwhelming majority this time, too.

"Haru, are you okay?"

After homeroom, Makoto came to talk to him with a worried look on his face.

"What is it?"

"Your face is red. Don't you have a fever?"

Aki told him the same thing in the morning, too. He put the palm of his hand on the back of his neck to try and see. He felt a little feverish.

"Not really, I'm fine."

It's not something to make others worry over. When he thought that Makoto's worried expression for a sick patient was unpleasant, Rin came around, calling out in his out of place voice.

"Well who would've thought. That Tachibana was a romanticist who loves flowers."

Folding his arms, he decides to his own convenience to make fun of Makoto.

"Anyways, Matusoka-kun's idea surprised me. Launching an artificial satellite. Isn't that even more romanticist?"

"It wasn't launching one, but putting a message on an artificial satellite. About our dreams and friends."

"Hmm, Matsuoka-kun is a romanticist as I thought."

"Well, that may be true. But hey, it sure surprised me that Nanase-kun agreed to my idea. Actually, I was a little bit happy."

Rin's voice and Makoto's voice both hurt his ears. Yelling at them for being noisy is too annoying and troublesome, too.

— This might be a bit bad.

When he thought that, Rin noticed Haruka's condition. Thought it would've been fine if he hadn't.

"Huh? Nanase-kun, feeling ill?"

He wasn't asking Haruka. He was asking Makoto.

"About that, I'm thinking that he might have a fever—"

Saying that, Makoto peeks closer at Haruka's face.

"I told you I don't have a fever!"

Suppressing something was troublesome. The people near them turn around upon hearing Haruka's harsh voice. An unpleasant silence flowed in.

"..... My bad"

It's the same words he said to Aki in the morning. Standing up from his seat, Haruka walked towards the classroom's door. He wanted to be freed from everything in that place for even just a little bit of time. Feeling Makoto's anxious glance on his back, Haruka left the classroom.

As he tries getting on the bicycle he left at the foot of the stone steps, Haruka's feet suddenly stop. It's the bicycle he rides to go to the swimming club every day.

—— I wonder if he's going to run today, too.

A thought about Rin floats across a corner of his head. It's about 2 kilometers to Iwatobi SC from here. It's still shorter than the distance that Rin runs.

Haruka had barely done any athletic training. He didn't have much interest in training his body. To swim, in other words, to feel the water. That's what swimming meant to Haruka. He never once thought of swimming for the sake of winning against someone. So that's why he didn't bother with his time either and didn't feel the need to train his body.

It's just that with there being a guy who swims faster than himself, if it means that he feels the water more than himself, it's also a fact that there's a little ill feeling left in his chest. He doesn't know how Rin feels the water. But he's a guy who swims faster than him at 50m, who's in front of him until the 70m mark at 100m. He's running today, too —. That was plenty enough of a reason for Haruka to run as well.

He has a fever. It's something he knew without needing Makoto and Aki to tell him. However, until now, if it was just a little cold or fever, he cured it with swimming. He doesn't understand the reason. When he's in the water, it heals him. If it's just a cold, after he swam, he unbelievably got better.

So he had no intention from the start to take a break today, either. But, if he goes, he'll meet Rin. He'll see Rin running. While he passes by Rin on his bicycle, he'll look away. Then, he'll feel irritated at himself that he didn't run.

Just once, he looked up at the stairs leading to Makoto's house. Makoto isn't coming yet. Leaving his bicycle behind, he began running the 2 km distance in a light gait.

The wind blew on Mutsukibashi today, too. The wind hitting his cheeks, he unintentionally looks up at Myoujin-yama. Changing his mind that there's no particular reason for the wind to be blowing from the mountain, turning forward again, he keeps running.

White breath springs out. Sweat flows. It's been a long time since he ran a long distance. However, even though it's not like he was running that fast, he doesn't stop sweating. Even though it's not like there were any steep hill roads or stairs, his pulse is running around throughout his body. It could be because of the fever, gradually he couldn't control his irregular breathing any more. But even so, Haruka kept running, arrogantly scowling.

Makoto still isn't catching up to him. Maybe he's taking care of the goldfish again. Though it doesn't really matter.....

His vision sometimes strangely shaking, by the time he crossed the bridge, he became aware that he wouldn't be able to run all the way to the swimming club. He reached his limit when he was running on the embankment alongside the river. Stopping his feet, putting his hands on his knees, his breathing is hard and loud. Looking down, the sweat running down Haruka's face made many little blotches on the ground. If he could've done so, he wanted to lie down with his arms and legs outstretched. Just like Rin on that day.

—— Darn. What am I so exhausted for!

Even though he tries lifting his spirits, his chest hurts and his feet don't move forward. When he thinks about Makoto or Rin finding him in a place like this, he gets an unbearable feeling. From so much as making someone concerned or worrying them, he only thinks of wanting to disappear. He strongly wanted to deny that his existence is like that. He's strangely in a hurry to quickly put his breathing back into order.

After a while, when his breathing had calmed down a bit, suddenly, he noticed something white on the river's surface, though it kept appearing and disappearing. Aki's scarf was stuck there, in a place he could reach from the riverside beneath the embankment. Though he thought it had already sunk and had gotten washed away to sea, it seems to have been pushed back by the high tide's influence. Thinking he could pick it up, it drifted about in a reachable spot. Thinking he could pick it up.....

Hearing the sound of breaks, he turns around by reflex. With a worried expression, Aki

got off her bicycle.

"What happened, Nanase-kun?"

Stretching the muscles along his spine, he forcibly entrapped his rough breathing. He intended to say it was nothing and run off again, but he stays silent. If he were to speak, he felt that the suppressed breath would flow out all at once.

"Ah"

Aki's glance passed by Haruka and turned towards the water's surface. To the white scarf, drifting about on the river's surface.... After clicking his tongue in his mind, Haruka tried inhaling a deep breath. It had already considerably calmed down.

He thought it'd be fine if he spoke now.

"I'll get it for you."

"No that's okay, it's dangerous."

It's not like I got exhausted in a place like this. Since I saw Aki's scarf, I just stopped for a little bit. Making excuses for himself, he turns his back to Aki.

When he tried stepping forward onto the embankment's slope, all of a sudden, dizziness struck him. The moment he thought he was done for, his vision getting dark, he lost his sense of balance. He should've felt the sensation of the weed growing on the ground on the bottom of his feet. However, those feet cutting the air, his body rolled and fell down the embankment. He can't tell up from down. Though it's his body, he had no idea at all what was happening to him. The only thing he heard was Aki's scream, like the sound of the roadside poplar trees trembling in the wind.

The water's coldness transmitting to the lower half of his body, because of that he realized that he fell into the river. His vision steadily returns. Half of his body was in the water. His right hand is gripping the dead grass on the riverside. His left hand... was entangled in the white scarf that had turned light brown.

— This is the worst.... What the heck am I doing?

That was all he remembered clearly. The river's water, without healing Haruka's body or heart, snatching away only his body temperature, thoughts came to a halt.

In the space between dreams and reality, it feels like he could faintly hear Makoto's voice calling his name and the sound of the ambulance's siren.

"Haru, Haru!"

Then, Haruka fell into a deep slumber.

Because his head was terribly hurting, he opened his eyes. Before he thought about where he was, Makoto's voice reached his ears.

"Haru, did you wake up? Haru."

He doesn't think that it's hurting his ears. He didn't feel resistance over being worried about. Makoto's voice naturally flows, without being different from usual.

He tries matching the focus of his eyes, but it doesn't go well. His head still hurts. His body is heavy. And yet, since his eyes were open, wanting to tell him not to worry, he tries emitting words.

"Where is this place?"

"It's the hospital."

"The hospital?"

He thought the fluorescent lamp was dazzling. When he tries thinking about why he's sleeping in a hospital, his head hurts again.

"Haru, are you okay? Your mom's coming soon, too. They contacted her just now."

At last, he could clearly see Makoto's face. As soon as he did, he noticed that another person was there behind him. Rin stood there silently, with a serious expression that he doesn't usually show. Beside him, the white thing hung on the hanger is swaying in the breeze flowing from the air conditioner.

Is it the curtain? No, it's a thinner, cloth-like thing.....

— The scarf!

The moment he noticed that, his memories returned. Suddenly trying to get up, his entire body creaks.

"You mustn't overdo it. You had a 40 degree fever."

Haru wanted to know. After falling into the river, what happened for him to get here? He wanted to know right away.

"What about Yazaki?"

Aki was there, she should have seen it from beginning to end. Aki wasn't here.

"Zaki-chan should be at home. But surely I think she's worried, right about now."

"What happened to me?"

"Right when Matsuoka-kun and I crossed the bridge, we heard Zaki-chan's scream. When we went to take a look, Haru had fallen into the river."

After that, while the two of them pulled Haruka onto the embankment, Aki called for an ambulance. While Makoto and Rin got into the ambulance, Aki contacted the swimming club and their houses. They say that Aki firmly completed the role she was given, even while looking like she was about to cry.

"So, you should tell it to Zaki-chan properly later, too."

In the bed, he nods once. Makoto roughly explained to him what he wanted to know. His head hurt while he was listening, but he intended to appear as casual as possible.

"Oh, and Haru apparently has the influenza."

He got very irritated, that it ended up like this for something stupid like that.

"Then, I'll go and call for the doctor."

When Makoto opened the door and left, inside the hospital room suddenly got quiet. The only thing to be heard was the sound of the air conditioning and Haruka's rough breathing. And for the first time, he noticed that his breathing was irregular.

He saw Rin. He was silent all along, dropping his gaze diagonally downwards. Beside him, the scarf swayed.

"Thanks, Matsuoka."

He even surprised himself how honestly his words came out. Rin just bowed his head a little, he didn't even try looking in Haruka's direction. Afterwards, until Makoto came back, only Haruka's breathing and the air conditioning's sound echoed in the hospital room a bit.

Being exposed to the cold wind outside, it makes him realize how much warmer it was in the hospital room. While he walked, Rin put his hand that was growing numb with cold

in his jacket's pocket. His feet were unusually heavy. He can't breathe well. At last, he caught up with Makoto walking in front of him. He tried calling to Makoto.

"..... Tachibana."

It feels like it's been quite a while since he let his voice out. At least, it was the first time since he arrived at the hospital.

"What is it, Matsuoka-kun?"

"I....."

"Yeah."

Rin hesitated to speak. Makoto patiently waited for his next words without urging him. During that time, they kept walking without stopping their feet. It was like he was slowly waiting for Rin to catch up to him.

"I was seriously scared."

That was Rin's honest feeling. He's still feeling scared. Because of that, the internal organs all throughout his body hadn't stopped their unbalanced movement. He thought that even without being conscious of it, his lungs breathed, his heart pulsated. And now, when he had to take deep breaths, he realizes that all his functions seemed to stop.

"I was so scared, I had no idea what to do."

Turning around, Makoto showed his smile. Suddenly raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, he turns back like that and keeps walking.

"It's fine. It's just the influenza. He didn't catch pneumonia, he'll get better right away."

He thinks that what happened to Haruka is terrible. Seeing him fall into the river, it's also a fact that he hurried over to him. He was hasty and flustered. But he didn't think that Rin was scared.

"No, it's not about Nanase. I meant you, at the bridge."

"Huh?"

Makoto's feet stop. While accepting Rin's straightforward gaze, even so he still kept smiling. It was just like he had heard a joke.

"When we pulled out Nanase from the river, you were shaking, weren't you?"

"Was I? I was kind of in a daze, I don't really remember."

Makoto turns around again and starts walking. While staring at Makoto's back, Rin remembered that he was certainly shaking back then.

Although he gave precise instructions to Rin and Aki, Makoto shaking so much that it was unmistakable. His hands, his feet, his face. Not because of the cold, he was shaking in a way like he was afraid of something. Then, after they got into the ambulance, holding just the edge of Haruka's clothes, he shook while he kept calling Haruka's name.

Rin had never seen someone so frightened by something before. As it ended up clinging deep in his chest, his body doesn't function the way he wants it to.

Saying nothing more than that, Rin kept walking behind Makoto. He doesn't mind if Makoto says that he doesn't remember. He didn't want to force him to say things he didn't want to. So he had no intention of inquiring any further than that, he thought that it wouldn't change anything if he asked.

While they were waiting at the bus stop and even after they got on, the whole time the both of them were in silence, their gazes didn't connect. Rin stands up, pushing the bell to get off. Since he gets off two bus stops before Makoto.

"See ya."

"Yeah."

He saw Makoto's face for just that one moment. He was the usual Makoto. Raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, he was showing his usual smile. Maybe he was minding it too much. When he got off the bus, suddenly all his strength left his body. Taking in a deep breath of the evening air, Rin saw off the bus running away towards the madder red sky.

As Rin was getting off the bus, Makoto's hand began to shake. The something that strained him suddenly snapping, his hand shook so much that he couldn't do anything about it anymore out of his own will. It soon passed on to his body, his feet, his chest, his face shaking, his teeth clatter. He holds his body tight with his own two hands. No matter how much strength he puts into it, he doesn't stop shaking. No matter how much he grits his teeth, his lips tremble. Makoto couldn't do anything about the tears that silently overflowed without a sound.

Chapter Three: Free

Haruka turned up at the swimming club four days later. When Makoto was changing in the changing rooms, he went in with his usual expression, out of breath.

"Haru....."

"Hi."

"Don't just say 'hi'. What happened? Are you feeling better already?"

"I'm okay now."

Mumbling in a small voice, he looks at Makoto's worried expression unsympathetically.

"You're not okay. You're breathing so hard, don't you still have a fever?"

While waving his hand like he's being a pain, Haruka opened the locker's door. Irritated, Makoto raises his voice a little.

"Haru."

"I ran here."

"From where?"

"From home, obviously."

Saying that, he threw his bag in the locker.

"Hey, Haru. You didn't even come to school today."

"I got better after noon."

While taking off his clothes, he replies like it's too much effort. As much as to say that he doesn't even want to see Makoto's worried expression, Haruka silently continued to change clothes.

"Haru, what are you going to do if you get a fever again?"

"Makoto!"

Haruka's strong tone and the sound of the locker door closing overlapping, it pushed aside Makoto's words.

"... wh-what?"

Starting to walk away, Haruka places his left hand on Makoto's shoulder and passes him by like that.

"Thank you."

Leaving behind those words, he left the changing room.

All the strength left Makoto's body at once. His cheeks softening from the words he didn't even expect to hear, he unconsciously raised his eight-shaped eyebrows. And then, the worried feelings he had for Haruka disappeared to somewhere.

He tries swimming 1000m in forward crawl as usual. His breathing that was so heavy after running wasn't irregular at all in the water. On the contrary, he feels his body being healed. For Haruka, it was the same water as always.

It's a lie when he said that he felt better after noon. To be exact, it's now that he's starting to feel better. School won't heal his body or heart for him. That's why he took the day off. While feeling his physical strength recovering in the water, he gradually kept raising his speed.

Finishing his swim with a smooth form, when he lifted his face from the water, a hand extended towards Haruka. It's a hand more slender and delicate than Makoto's. He hesitates for a moment, wondering if he would break it by holding on to it. Removing his goggles, he looked up, narrowing his eyes.

"Welcome back. I'm glad you got better so soon."

With a smile that looked like a bloomed sunflower, Aki looked down at him. It's the hand that he brushed away that time on the poplar-lined road. Grasping that held-out hand, Haruka got up on the poolside.

"Thanks."

"Yeah."

While shaking his head to the right once to get the water out of his ear, Haruka spoke in a small voice.

"The scarf."

Only the short noun escapes from Haruka's mouth. The sunflower-like smile became a little dim.

"Yeah."

"Since it ended up like that, I was wondering if you still needed it."

Though the scarf that had turned light brown in the river couldn't regain its whiteness even after it was washed, he entrusted it to Makoto and asked him to give it back to Aki.

"Yeah, I got it from Tachibana-kun."

Aki casts her eyes down. She probably thinks that it's her fault that Haruka fell in the river.

"Don't drop it again."

"Sorry."

— Don't apologize. I should be the one apologizing.

"Sorry for everything."

Aki's expression brightens from Haruka's words. Her sunflower-like smile came back again.

"Don't be."

Aki tilted her head to the side a little.

From that conversation alone, he understood well enough just how much he had worried her.

Someone calls for her from a distance.

"Zaki, we're starting the practice for the relay!"

"Alright!"

After replying to them, she shows her palm to Haruka.

"See you later."

"Yeah."

Aki ran off, leaving behind a smile. Rin approaches, stepping aside to pass by Aki.

"Nanase, we're practicing for the relay, too."

— Relay? Why do I need to practice for that?

As he thought that, Makoto came running, catching up behind Rin.

"No way. You shouldn't force yourself any more for today, Haru."

Going beyond worry, he sounded just like a guardian. He thought that if they're being so concerned about him, who cares about the relay, it would be better if he were in the water.

"What kind of relay? I only swim free, though."

He asks Rin, pretending not to see Makoto.

"It's free."

"Haru."

Thinking of Makoto's worried expression as unpleasant, he passes by in front of him.

"Haru!"

A whistle blowing somewhere drowned out Makoto's voice as he shouted at Haru's back again.

Relay practice puts the emphasis on the dive. Using a 25m short lane, each of them lining up on both sides of the pool, lining up at the back again after swimming, they repeat the practice until time runs out.

In the case of a relay, you can say that the time of the start and touch bring out the differences the most. By nature, the act of swimming is that at the same time as acquiring propulsive power, that itself ends up creating the water's resistance. In other words, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that how you maximize the strength of the starting kick is of great importance. For that reason, this kind of practice becomes important since you have to become sufficiently aware of the landing's angle and the underwater stance.

In a free relay, there are four kinds of dives. In freestyle swimming, although any kind of swimming is allowed, since they choose the forward crawl in most cases, 'freestyle' and 'crawl' are used in approximately the same meaning. Therefore, they carried out this practice with the forward crawl as well.

Jumping into the pool in a light manner, Haruka created a rift in the water. Slipping his body into it, finishing his swim with light strokes, he touches the surface of the wall. Rin

jumps in overhead. Although he's the same height as Haruka, the strength in his feet exceeds that of Makoto's or Haruka's. It's because his kick strength has become a great weapon for him that he's excessively fast in the short lane.

Haruka was thinking about that as he was climbing onto the poolside. In swimming the same 100m distance, there are three turns on the short lane and one turn on the long lane. That's why in Rin's case, he's overwhelmingly better in the short lane. During the tournament, that's the reason why he's ahead of Haruka until the 70m mark. And that was also the reason why Haruka runs.

He doesn't deny that there's someone who swims faster than him. But there's no way he'll simply acknowledge it. It's not that he wants to win or doesn't like losing. It's just that he can't accept it so easily that someone else feels the water better than him.

If you were to ask him if running will make him dive farther, his honest reply would be that he doesn't know. But since there's someone who can dive farther than him who runs, that is enough of a reason for running.

While thinking about things like that, Haruka kept observing Rin's swimming. Makoto stands on the other side. Wearing his cap and his goggles equipped, he doesn't look like an elementary school student at all. Wide shoulders and thick chest. It's not like he had that much muscle, but standing at the starting block, he made a fairly overpowering impression.

As Rin touches the surface of the wall, Makoto dived in with a huge splash. He forcibly plunges forward, his strokes filled with all his strength. Even though they're not measuring the time, he swims with all his power. That was usual for Makoto. The same Makoto as ever, he was in the same water as always.

When there were only a few meters left to the goal, Makoto suddenly stopped swimming. He thought that he might've swallowed some water, but it seemed different somehow. It doesn't seem like his feet were cramping, either. He just stood in the water, breathing painfully hard.

Now, after just getting out of the water, Rin leapt back in again and swam toward Makoto.

"What happened, Tachibana?"

Raising his goggles, Makoto showed a smile with his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"Sorry, I'm all right. Looks like I'm just in bad condition a little."

Seeming like his smiling face could turn into a tear-stained one at any-time, Haruka looked away from Makoto. Then just like that, he walked off towards the shower room.

As a result of the gathered candidates put forth by all the classes for the graduation project, Aki's idea was used in the end. They had formally decided to plant a flowerbed around the cherry blossom. Once it was decided, the preparations steadily advanced, the project's arrangements were put together in a blink. And then, before several days had passed, having large quantities of clay carried into the classrooms, the classrooms ended up looking quite like a brick workshop after school. In the large space created by pushing the desks to the back, spreading out a large blue sheet, the clay was piled there like a mountain. Although it wasn't red yet, apparently it would turn red from the iron oxidizing in it after baking.

The work began with kneading the clay. Taking the pieces of clay cut off one person at a time to wherever they pleased, while pushing out the air from inside it with placing their body weight on it, they diligently knead it up. Unless they do this process properly, it will end up breaking when it's baked.

Haruka made sure to concentrate on it as nothing other than work, while trying not to think about the fact that it'll be placed near the cherry blossom.

"Hey, Nanase."

While kneading the clay, Rin came over to talk to him. He just looks at him without answering.

"It's about the next tournament, wanna do the medley relay?"

The next tournament will be held after the graduation ceremony, at the end of March. Every year, the local clubs assemble in one building and it's carried out quite grandly. It was at that tournament that they had met Rin, too.

Since becoming 6th graders, Makoto and Haruka participated in most of the tournaments. All the contests are held separately by age and gender, one person generally participates in three to four events, but Haruka had only ever entered freestyle ones. And so, he's a three-time champion in free. Makoto has participated in both free and breaststroke before, he's had the experience of holding the breaststroke champion title twice.

"Not unless I swim free."

Haruka says while dropping his gaze on the clay.

"You sure are obsessed, Nanase. It's fine, free being your specialty. Hey, Tachibana."

Suddenly brought into the discussion, Makoto's hands stop.

"If it's a medley relay, what'll you do for the batta? Wouldn't it be fine to just do the free relay?"

For swimming the medley relay, team members for the four events of backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly and free are necessary. However, there wasn't anyone in the same age group at Iwatobi SC who was fast at the butterfly.

To Makoto's words, Rin replies in a somewhat shocked tone.

"The medley's fine. I'll swim the batta. Tachibana can do the bure, so all that's left is bakkku. There's no one who stands out, but eh, as long as they can swim normally, we'll handle the rest somehow. Let's find someone suitable for bakkku."

Suppressed by Rin's pushiness, Makoto went back to work on kneading the clay without saying anything back.

Instead of Makoto, Haruka's hand stops.

"Even though I said that I only swim free, don't just go ahead and continue the discussion about the relay."

He tried saying it by placing his strong intent inside the peaceful tone. Rin blows a sigh into the clay. In the impression that disobedient children will get their hands burnt. But the tone of his voice hailed to Haruka's strong intent.

"So that's why I said that it's fine for Nanase to swim free!"

The inflection at the end of the word is too strong. Even if he tries to keep down his mouth after saying it, it's already too late. The glances of their classmates scattered about on the blue sheet have completely focused on them now. Makoto's looking at Rin, too, his hands stopping. Rin suddenly stood up, having thought of something. In any case, since he ended up attracting their attention already, it's probably why he took up a defiant attitude.

"S-so that's why, let's write a message on the bricks. Like our favorite word. Something that'll stay in your memory, freely write it. Freely, yeah?"

Just when he thought that's it too late to act like a naive graduate, Aki stood up.

"That sounds good, right?"

Aki's single phrase changed the mood of the class. With everyone getting excited, talking about what sort of message to write, the classroom went back to being busy.

Dropping his shoulders, Rin lets out a tiny breath. Haruka and Makoto kept kneading the clay like nothing had happened. Sitting down as well, Rin went back to work on kneading the clay in silence.

In the end, they didn't return to the discussion about the relay and left it at that for the day.

Several wispy clouds flowed at the top of Myoujinyama. The wind is probably blowing on Mutsukibashi today, too. While thinking about that, Haruka looked at his wristwatch. Compared to the beginning, how much faster has he gotten? It isn't really his objective and neither is he competing against anyone. And yet, he still cared about his time for some reason. Suffice it to say, it was probably himself from yesterday. It could be something like, exceeding his limit to tread upon the new world on the other side.

Unlike the water, he didn't think the land would do anything like healing him. Even though that's what he thought, when he's running, sometimes he felt something being released from within him. But he's just trying to run fast on land. He thinks that there's still a huge gap between swimming and getting obsessed over something like that. However, it's possible that if he keeps running like this, before long, it'll hold a similar significance.

While vaguely thinking about things like that, when he approached Mutsukibashi, the sound of another pair of feet overlapped Haruka's.

"Good morning, Nanase-kun."

When he turns around after being called out to, Hazuki Nagisa was about to catch up to him.

"Hi."

He lightly mutters. His common points with Nagisa are that they go to the same swimming club and that they have girlish names. At school, he's a fifth grader a year below him.

He doesn't think about why Nagisa is running. It's because he ends up thinking about why Nagisa is running with a happy expression instead.

"Nanase-kun, lately, you've been running every day, right?"

His saccharine voice coiled about in Haruka's ears.

"Just a little, yeah."

Making a blunt response, he thought it would close the conversation. It's not that he wanted to avoid Nagisa. It's just that he didn't want to think about anything else while he's running. He didn't like his mind straying to anything else other than running. He feels like the door is obstinately locked again on whatever was close to being released.

"Me, too....."

Nagisa's voice was interrupted because he was out of breath.

"I'm thinking that I'll start running from today onwards, too, so is it okay if I ran with you?"

He didn't have a reason to refuse.

"I don't really mind."

"Really? I'm glad."

"But I won't wait for you if you can't keep up."

"Okay."

He didn't intend to keep up with Nagisa's conversation any longer. He speeds up before they finish crossing the bridge. Leaving behind Nagisa's long breath, he returned to his own world again. Suddenly, a wind passes by Haruka. Getting a feeling that it was Nagisa, for a moment, his breath was taken away. Only for a moment, though.

His bad feeling was right on the mark. Finishing the 1000m butterfly, when he raised his head, the kid with the big round eyes was peering down at him. Every day since then.

"What?"

He knew what he wanted, but he still ventured to ask.

"You really can swim the batta, huh?"

"Ah, yeah. And?"

"You're good at it, huh?"

— Not as good as your grasshopper, though.

"You're gonna swim, right? I'll look at it for ya."

He quickly climbs up on the poolside. He already gave up on futile resistance.

"Actually, I'm taking a little break from the batta."

Oh, did he get tired of it already? He can't expect any improvement at all like that.

"Then, you don't have any more business with me."

"No, that's not it, uhh, Matsuoka-kun, will you be in the next tournament?"

"Yeah. For now, I guess."

Aki was there. She's standing at the farthest lane. Is Haruka the one swimming?

"Which one are you swimming?"

"Medley relay."

It's Haruka. With the elegance of a water bird flying in the sky, he swims like he's gliding. There was no one apart from Haruka who could swim like that.

"With Nanase-kun?"

"It's not decided yet, but I asked Nanase and Tachibana."

Is Aki going to wait until Haruka finishes swimming? Just as he thought that, she stepped away from the lane all of a sudden. Even as she's leaving, she sometimes looks back at Haruka.

"One, two, three. And the last one?"

"No one yet."

When Aki wasn't visible from the crowd of people anymore, Haruka climbed up on the poolside.

"Then, let me join. I'm fast."

His big round eyes are sparkling.

"No way."

He thinks that Aki might've asked for something unreasonable. It's fine as long as it doesn't feel like too much of a burden.

"Why?"

"There's no way that a guy who abandons practicing the batta halfway through is fast."

"You're wrong. I didn't abandon it, I'm just taking a break."

"Then, why are you taking a break?"

"I'm doing the bure in the medley relay, so I'm practicing that."

"Oh? The order you're going in is real jumbled up."

"C'mon, let me be a member."

"No good people are not allowed!"

Since there would be no end to it, he cut short the conversation by walking away. While hearing Nagisa say 'meanie' behind his back, he left the place with quick steps.

"What did you write on the brick?"

After he finished a swim, when Haruka was sitting on the bench, Aki came and took a seat beside him.

"Free."

He only gives a curt, minimum necessary reply.

"That's just like Nanase-kun. It can be interpreted as 'Living in freedom' and it can be interpreted as 'devoted to freestyle', too, right?"

It doesn't have such a deep meaning. Since he told Rin that he only swims free, he just wrote it mostly out of desperation. Even though he was asked, he had no intention of going along with social rules and asking Aki what she wrote. More than that, he wanted to ask her if she went out of her way now to come for the sake of such a conversation. If she had any other business with him instead.

Perhaps sensing that Haruka was feeling like that, Aki began to speak after inhaling a small breath.

"Say, Nanase-kun....."

After speaking out, Aki cuts her words short. He thinks it's unusual for Aki.

"What."

He tries to encourage her to keep talking. With Haruka's support, Aki's lips started to move again, with a faint little smile floating on them.

"I'm thinking of participating in the medley relay, actually. Together with Miki, Maki and Yuuki. It's kind of funny, huh? Just by looking at our names, it's like we're sisters, right?"

Saying that, Aki shows a smile. Did she end up gulping down the words she had begun to say? While thinking that it doesn't matter, he leaves it as it is with a halfhearted reply.

"Yeah, true."

Makoto, who had finished swimming just now, was climbing up onto the poolside. It was just the right time for them to switch. From Makoto to Haruka in the lane, from Haruka to Makoto for talking with Aki. Standing up, Haruka walked to the starting block.

"Nanase-kun."

Aki stood up and called Haruka to stop. His feet stop but he doesn't reply. Aki boldly strained her voice from her throat.

"You should do the relay."

Without turning his body, he looks at Aki over his shoulder just by tilting his head.

"Why?"

"But Nanase-kun, aren't you the fastest among the sixth graders?"

"At 50m, Matsuoka's faster."

He starts walking again, returning his glance to the front. Passing by Makoto who's dripping with water, he dove in from the starting block. Breaking away from Aki's gaze, in the water, Haruka is once again released from his ties.

"Hey, Haru. Did you run here today, too?"

Makoto asked him as he's drying himself in the changing rooms. Being a little aware of Rin changing his clothes behind him, Haruka replied in a murmur.

"Yeah, I did."

He wondered if Rin would say something, but he heard Nagisa's voice instead.

"I decided to run starting today, too. Nanase-kun said it's alright for me to run with him."

"Ohh?"

Speaking in a teasing voice, Rin stares at Haruka. Since he seems to be misunderstanding something, he adds something just in case.

"As long as he can keep up with me, that is."

Even though he said that, Rin was still grinning. He feels slightly irritated. Makoto came to the rescue of Haruka's feelings.

"Maybe I'll run with you, too."

Even though he said it like a joke, Haruka knew that he's not joking. When he asked 'did you run here?', he thought that he was probably going to say that. So he got even more irritated. He has no reason to refuse.

"Just saying, I won't wait for you."

"It's alright. I'm not that slow."

"Not just that, I won't wait if you're late, either."

"Ah, so it's about that."

A small shadow floated across Makoto's eyes. But disappearing so soon that you'd think it was just a hallucination, Makoto returns to the way he was before.

"It's alright. I'll be able to get there in time starting tomorrow."

Then, what kept you until today? Before Haruka could say that, Nagisa cut in.

"We can run together on the way home, too, right?"

After taking his bag out of the locker, Haruka closed its door.

"As long as you hurry up with changing."

While saying that, he leaves the changing rooms at a quick pace.

"Ah, wait up."

While putting on half his sock and snatching out his bag, Nagisa ran after Haruka. Finding the scene to be amusing, Rin and Makoto laughed for a little while. Once their laughter died down, it felt like the temperature had suddenly dropped in the quiet changing rooms. Taking out his bag from the locker, Makoto lightly waved his hand at Rin.

"Then, I'm going home, too."

"Tachibana."

Makoto's feet stop just as he was about to step forward. When he turned around, Rin was wearing an unusually serious expression.

"What?"

"What do you think about the medley relay?"

"What'....., I don't mind being in it."

It's troubling to be asked what he thinks. There's nothing else he could reply. Rin didn't even look happy as he lightly nods his head a few times. It doesn't seem like he was looking for a particular answer.

"Do you think Nanase would swim in the medley relay?"

'Could you ask him to swim it?' That's what Makoto heard it as. It seemed like it was Haruka whom Rin was interested in.

"I think it wouldn't change anything even if I ask."

"Oh don't say that."

"Hmm, I guess I can try talking to him about it."

"I'm counting on you."

Being looked at with eyes that say 'You're the only one I can count on', he ends up feeling a little pressured.

"See you later."

"Yeah."

After leaving the changing rooms, he tried to go to the lobby in a half run. However, Haruka was nowhere to be found. Even though Rin asked him to, it's not like he had to do it right away, but he didn't want to drag it on for too long, either. That's all there is to it. He had no intention of persuading Haruka, he thought that he wouldn't mind it if he didn't want to. He has no reason to fuss over the medley relay. Haruka's free to swim in whatever he wants.

The clicking sound echoed as he opened the parking area for bicycles with the key. He tries to take a look at the area where Haruka usually parks his bicycle. A different bicycle stood there today. The parking area for bicycles without Haruka felt terribly inhuman and cold.

—— I'll run here starting tomorrow.

He tries to murmur to himself again what he said lightly in the changing rooms. Then, getting onto his bicycle, he starts pedaling.

He caught up to Nagisa at Mutsukibashi. Haruka's already running near the middle of the bridge.

"Keep at it, Nagisa!"

He looked up at him as he tries calling out to him, wheezing out white breaths. He was glad that he was overtaken like that, but feeling a little sorry for him for being left behind Haruka, since he's also been abandoned by him, he decided to keep the pace with him.

"Do your best, Nagisa!"

He can talk to Haruka tomorrow. There's no particular need to be in a hurry. Makoto crossed Mutsukibashi while cheering on Nagisa as he stumbles, blown by the wind.

As soon as Makoto gets home, having taken out the gardening shovel, he started digging up a corner of the garden. It didn't even take him a minute to finish the work. After that, he opened the entranceway's door and turned on the light.

The goldfish bowl was left on top of the shoe shelf. Two goldfish are drifting about on the water's surface. Without swimming or moving their gills, they were just peacefully drifting about on the water's surface. You could tell at a glance that they were sick from the many white specks on the surface of their scales.

Even though he washed the goldfish bowl every day immediately after getting home from

school and treated them by immersing them in medicinal water, after he came home from school today, both of them were floating.

Makoto gently tried to put his hand into the goldfish bowl. The lukewarm sensation coils about his fingertips. Just like a stagnant swamp, he couldn't feel the beat of life in it at all. With that hand, he scoops up the goldfish coldly drifting about. The two goldfish slept in Makoto's hand, without the slightest flick of their fin.

Carrying the goldfish to the corner of the garden, he placed them in the hole he had dug earlier. When he covered it up with earth, the ceremony came to a finish. When he thought about what a small life it was to have ended with just that, he felt a splintered pain deep in his chest.

"You still wanted to swim."

Makoto stood up, holding the gardening shovel. Even though he stood up, he couldn't take away his gaze from the ground yet.

"Sorry."

After throwing down the shovel and running to the entranceway, Makoto turned off the pump. Peaceful and dark, only the water that held no meaning remained. Thinking that it was just like the water that had tried to swallow Haruka that time, his hands begin to shake again slightly.

Rushing out of his house, Makoto vigorously ran down the stairs until he reached the stone steps leading to the shrine. Haruka's house is right there. He has to meet him right now. It can't be tomorrow. He'll meet him now. If he doesn't, he won't be able to stay himself. He wants to meet Haruka—.

„Makoto.”

Just as he began to climb the stone steps with the evening approaching, he was suddenly called to stop. Makoto's feet stop, the beats of his pulse getting louder.

— Haru's voice.....

He slowly raises his gaze, ascending the stone steps one step at a time. While the setting sun shines on the single torii, it stood with its shadow deepening. And then, standing below that torii is..... Haruka.



—— Was he waiting for me?

Raising the question in his mind, he immediately denied it. That can't be. Even though he knew it, and yet, part of him wanted to think that. His feet start moving on their own. Towards Haruka.....

He climbs up the stairs, gazing at Haruka. He can't move his glance. He can't take his eyes off of Haruka. Makoto climbed all the way up until the single torii, like he was being pulled by something. So close to Haruka that he could touch him if he were to stretch out his hand.

"Haru..... Were you here all along?"

"Yeah."

Expressionlessly, he replies in a tiny mumble.

"Did you know I was coming?"

Even if he knew that it can't be so, he couldn't keep from asking.

"Nope."

"Then, why...."

—— are you standing in a place like this?

"I was looking at the sunset."

Makoto tries turning toward the same direction as Haruka's glance is pointing to. Weaving its way between the maple and zelkova trees, it appeared like the red setting sun was trying to sink the center of the wispy clouds into the horizon. Since the setting sun was blurred by the clouds, parting with its radiance from its time as the sun, it revealed its outlines as large as the moon. He does think it's beautiful, but it's not something unusual to be so fascinated by.

Maybe he was waiting after all. Even though he said differently, he wanted to think that. Just by thinking that, he feels the throbbing pain deep in his chest calming down.

"Do you have some business with me?"

Haruka's face shone red, with the setting sun illuminating it.

"Rather than business, after seeing Haru's face, somehow, I might be feeling at ease

now."

"What does that mean?"

Showing his teeth a little, Haruka laughs a bit.

"It's weird, huh?"

Makoto laughed too, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows. Speaking of which, he thought that it's been quite a while since he spoke to Haruka with just the two of them. Lately, Rin's with them wherever they go.

All of a sudden, Haruka looks straight into Makoto's eyes. The light of the setting sun illuminating deep into his eyes, it felt like Haruka's heart could be seen transparently.

"Makoto."

"What?"

"Are you scared of the water?"

His heart jumped. His hands begin to sweat. His throat drying up, he feels a tightness in his chest. It felt like the oxygen had run out, but only around him. Even if he pretends to be calm, he can't hold down his hard breathing.

He gazes at Haruka's eyes. He realized that he was the one whose heart could be seen through. It was like that since he was young. Even though he never said anything about himself, he knew everything about Makoto. He understood him. And then, he pretended not to understand. His heart opens up. There was no longer a meaning in locking things away.

Without criticizing him, without pressing questions, Haruka asked him in his usual quiet tone.

"All along?"

He nods his head without making a sound. His fear of the water isn't connected to whether or not he swims. No matter how much he swims, something inescapable lurks in the water. Even if it seems to be dormant, it doesn't mean it won't come and attack one day. The fearful feeling has inhabited Makoto's heart, knowing the scariness of that lurking thing, being frightened of shadows.

Haruka asked him with a short phrase again.

"Why?"

He wasn't uncomfortable with Haruka asking him. Rather, he wants him to know. Perhaps, he might have even been waiting for Haruka to say so. On the other hand, he also feels embarrassed for being weak. It's not like he was hiding it. However, he's been keeping it completely within him all along.

"When we were kids, the two of us saw all those people wearing the white kimonos and walking in a line, right? Do you remember?"

Haruka nods a little. The face of the child who turned around that time crossing Makoto's mind, at the same time, he thought that Haruka remembers it, too.

"Apparently, a large fishing boat sunk. A big boat with dozens of people on it. Three kilometers away from the fishing harbor, it was on its way to open sea."

He heard about such a thing happening years after he had seen that line. As Haruka turns his gaze towards the sea, so does Makoto. The wind blew like it was carrying away the setting sun.

"Three kilometers, that's a distance we easily swim every day. So why did the fishermen drown there?"

Something is lurking in the sea that can't swim such a distance. Even if they search for it, they surely can't find it. From the start, it's something that can't be seen with your eyes. He couldn't think of anything else.

"When I get in the pool, I lose my usual composure. Rather than swimming, it feels like I'm escaping from something. It's not even the sea and even my feet can reach. I'm always running away from the water."

Haruka listened without saying a word. The sun sinking below the horizon, the eastern sky starts to become dim. Still turned towards the sea, Makoto hid his eyes. And then, he slowly raises his gaze at Haruka.

"When Haru fell in the river, I shook with fear. I try and try to hold it back, but the shaking comes from inside my body. My hands and my feet, I couldn't stop my entire body from shaking."

The thing lurking in the water is trying to take Haruka away. That's what he thought. He thought that Haruka would disappear. That the fear that was only depicted in his head until then, had turned into a thing of reality and was coming to attack him. And then, every feeling other than 'terror' had flown out of Makoto. Since then, with no notice at

all, unexpectedly, that fear reawakens in his heart. Whether he's at home, at school or swimming at the pool..... When that fear comes, his body stiffens, his thoughts come to a halt. He ends up fighting against the attacking fear with all this might.

"It's not because Matsuoka-kun asked, but I'm thinking that I'll try swimming the medley relay. So..... Haru, let's swim together. It's no good if Haru's not there, if it isn't Haru. I want to swim with Haru!"

Without stirring, without even changing his expression, Haruka accepted them up front, Makoto's words that seemed to strike hard. To the point that it'd make you think as if he could even be able to count Makoto's breathing and pulse, with a cool gaze. That gaze of Haruka's cools down Makoto's burning heart and body. Makoto felt the ripples in his chest rapidly calming down.

"Sorry. It seems like I ended up saying something a little weird. Don't worry about it that much, okay? It's gotten dark already so I'll go home now."

The harbor's street lights starting to light up, the moon rose from the eastern sky.

"See you later."

When Makoto said that and was about to climb down the stone steps, Haruka's heavy mouth opened just a little.

"I'll think about it."

"Eh?"

"About the medley relay."

Makoto's eight-shaped eyebrows gently go up. His eyes narrowing, a smile returned to his mouth. For now, just saying that much was enough.

"Then, see you tomorrow, Haru."

"Yeah."

Makoto's heart became so much lighter that it couldn't be compared to earlier. It felt like he had finally put down the burden he'd been carrying on his own. He thinks that perhaps, from tomorrow onwards, days like today will continue.

Liking to swim even though he's afraid of the water, but wanting to escape when he enters the pool, and that's why he wants Haruka to be there, but Haruka is blunt as usual..... Even so, he didn't care about that right now. Just having Haruka understand

that that's what he's like was enough for now.

Makoto arrived at the road home from the stone steps with dusk drawing near on it in a light gait.

Chapter Four: Relay

A freezing wind blew on the road leading to the school today, too. On the road which everyone walked with their shoulders narrowed and their eyes cast down, only Rin was running. Passing by the other children while breathing out white breaths, while sometimes seeming like he'd collide with them.

Unlike the road to the swimming club, the poplar-lined road was unsuitable for running. Since there are too many people when they're heading to and from school, you can't run as you wish. That's why, it's sort of pointless for Rin to run here, it could be even said that he was just bothering those around him a little.

In front of where Rin was running, a white scarf stained light brown fluttered in the breeze. Speeding up a little, when Rin caught up to that scarf, he stopped his feet while gasping out white breaths.

"Morning, Yazaki-san."

Having turned around, a smile was blooming on Aki's face again today. He thinks that perhaps she had been walking with a smile on her face all along.

"Morning, Matsuoka-kun. Did you run here?"

"Yeah, well, it's kind of like training."

To show off, he breathes out white puffs of breath again.

"Oh, that's amazing. But it's dangerous to run in a place like this, you know."

Rin gulped down the white puffs of breath he was breathing out.

"Yeah, well, I pay attention while I'm running."

Aki's scarf fluttering in the wind, it grazed Rin's cheek. The scarf with filth staining it that wouldn't come out even after washing..... Rin doesn't know why Haruka went so far as climbing down the embankment to pick this scarf up. He had no intention of asking by now. Just like he had no intention of pursuing why Makoto was trembling.

That's why Rin didn't think of asking Aki why she's wearing this white scarf stained light brown, either.

"Hey, sorry for asking you to do something unreasonable yesterday."

As Rin says that, Aki tilted her head to the side a bit.

"No, that's not so. I think Nanase-kun should swim in the relay, too."

"Ohh? Why?"

To Rin's straightforward question, Aki slightly lowered her eyes, still smiling. And then, she slowly raised her gaze and stared off into the distance.

"Nanase-kun can do anything on his own. Studying and exercise, he's even skilled at drawing. Really, he just ends up being able to do anything, right? So, everyone relies on him, but he rarely relies on anyone else voluntarily, doesn't he?"

He thinks it's certainly like that. Although he had just changed schools, it was exactly the impression Rin had of Haruka. Even though he doesn't seek out relations out of his own accord, it's not like he's being isolated. Rather, he's someone whom the class depends on. And when he's relied on, he showed that he always lived up to the expectations. In that strange balance, Haruka is supported by those around him.

"I think Nanase-kun's a kind person. That's why he doesn't say the things he wants to, and tries not to worry others so much. I'm sure he doesn't like hurting others and brushing them aside. But I don't think it's very good to think about that too much. I think it would be better if Nanase-kun became more assertive."

Aki turns towards Rin with a look that seemed to ask what he thinks about it. Frankly speaking, he hadn't even thought about going along with Haruka's personality. He couldn't imagine it as an 'it will turn out somehow' kind of personality, but what Rin holds interest in is only Haruka and his own feeling of wanting to swim in the relay.

"I thought the same thing, too. That guy seriously lacks a sense of humor. He should follow my example a little, yeah?"

Joking a little, he holds the conversation together as he sees fit. Aki laughed a little at Rin's words.

"That's for sure. It would be just right if you added it up and split it between you two, huh?"

"By that, you mean I get too carried away?"

Aki's meaningful smile confirmed those words.

"It's not like that. But still, I kind of want to see Nanase-kun trying his best with everyone."

Aki looks up at the sky. On that sky, the cirrus clouds that were indeed winter-like flowed

like a painting drawn in pastel crayons.

Haruka climbed down on the stone steps just as Makoto climbed down, too.

"Hey, I wasn't late, was I?"

"Let's go."

Haruka and Makoto started running side by side, breathing out white puffs of breath.

When they reach the vicinity of Mutsukibashi, Nagisa was waiting for them. In response to Nagisa waving his hand, Haruka shows the palm of his right hand a little. Nagisa's glance going past Haruka and Makoto, he widely waved at that person, too. He knows even without looking. That it's Rin, at least. The footsteps drawing nearer gradually grow louder, he lined up beside them before they approach the bridge.

"Yo."

To Rin's voice calling out, Haruka replied by fleetingly showing him his palm. From what he sees, it couldn't be interpreted as anything other than he's saying to go to the other side.

Nagisa runs lined up beside Haruka.

"Nanase-kun. Today, I'll properly keep up for sure."

"If took a break over there, then it won't become much of a training."

"Then, starting tomorrow I'll wait while stepping in place."

If he was serious or if he was joking, that sort of thing is so typical of Nagisa that it almost makes him laugh. Behind him, Makoto and Rin burst into laughter instead of Haruka. When they see Nagisa looking confused, it appears he was being serious about it.

"Though I said stepping in place, I meant stepping in place really-really fast."



The laughter of the two behind them grows louder. Rin's feet getting tangled for a moment, it looked like he was going to lose his balance.

"I'm gonna leave you behind if you chatter."

Haruka sped up a little. Was the wind blowing again today on Mutsukibashi? Haruka had forgotten about that until they finished crossing the bridge.

Nagisa earnestly keeps up. If he stays at this speed, he might not be able to keep running beside him anymore. That's how it happened yesterday. Nagisa's breathing getting harder, as he sees him fall behind by a step, Haruka slightly cast his eyes down.

— So this is as far as he can go.

A sigh mingles inside a long breath. And then, Haruka's feet slow down just a little.

"Oh."

Rin said in a tiny voice. "Nanase sure is kind." Getting a feeling that he heard him say something like that, Haruka clicked his tongue in his mind. Nagisa keeps up while wearing a pained expression. It appears to be that he's even lost the energy to chatter already.

When they reach Iwatobi SC, Nagisa was struggling with his hard breathing.

"Well done, you tried your best."

Rin lightly pats Nagisa on the back. Nagisa tried to say something, but he just kept voicelessly breathing out. And yet, by the time he changed and appeared on the poolside, he had completely returned to being the usual Nagisa.

"Matsuoka-kun. Are you practicing for the relay today?"

"Yep."

Rin gives him a half-interested, half-indifferent reply. Even for practicing, they don't have all the members yet. And besides, that has nothing to do with Nagisa.

"The fifth graders have their time trial today, you know. So then, if, and I mean if, I place first at the bure, will you let me be a member for the medley relay?"

Rin looks hard at Nagisa's face. He tried to find in which part of him was all that self-confidence, the basis for it in that delicate body.

—Am I wrong? Is Nagisa different from what I thought him to be?

He's supposed to be nothing more than a cute presence, like a little brother. He hadn't once felt even an atom of anything like a burning fighting spirit coming from him.

But once he tried considering it, he has only seen Nagisa for a month. Besides, when Rin was a fifth grader, he had even greater confidence in himself and was even cheekier. Even when he was chosen as a representative instead of the sixth graders, he thought of it as natural.

"Fine then. But only if you place first, of course."

He thinks he had ended up making quite a light promise. Though, he assumed that the possibility of it is probably almost none.

"Hooray! Hey did you hear that, Nanase-kun? I'll absolutely try my best for sure."

"Yeah, good luck."

Even that appropriate reply seemed to become an encouragement for Nagisa. He's innocently delighted since before he's even swum it. Believing that he's thinking too much about it after all, when Rin smiled from its infectiousness too, Makoto worriedly whispered to him.

"Hey Matsuoka-kun, are you sure? Making a promise like that."

"It's nothing to worry about. Anyways, if he comes in first, it means he has plenty of fighting power we can expect from him."

Rin thought that he'll make sure of Nagisa's true nature hiding inside him. He wanted to know if there truly was a heart hot enough to burn packed away in such a flimsy chest. If he wanted to swim in the medley relay, they'd be in trouble if he didn't have at least that much.

"That's not it, I meant about Haru. It seems like Nagisa's under the impression that he's a member."

"Just the opposite. No offense to Nagisa, but it's a tiny plan to get Nanase to be in the medley relay."

It's a faint hope, but the first condition of all is to reach the goal in first place. From what

Rin saw, it didn't seem like Haruka is alienating Nagisa to that extent. How long can he insist that he won't swim to Nagisa, who was so delighted to become a member? He thought that if he were to feel somewhat resistant to disappointing Nagisa, that there could be a possibility in that. Like how he loosened his pace for Nagisa's sake.

It was a tiny plan that waited for a miracle, with feelings that even resembled a prayer.

The fifth graders' time trial is carried out using the 25m pool's short lane. Their time will be measured on 50m, following the system of backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly and free in that order, competing in groups of eight.

Makoto received "I'll think about it" as a reply from Haruka. However, he thinks that there's still a little distance until it means "I'll swim". It's not that Nagisa wants to swim in the relay, he wants to swim with Haruka. Since Haruka is in the swimming club, Nagisa joined, too. Since Haruka runs, Nagisa runs with him, too. Since Haruka will be in the relay, Nagisa wants to swim in the relay, too. That's what it seemed like in Makoto's eyes, it wasn't based on having asked Nagisa about it. For the order of things, they should've properly made Haruka a member before they considered Nagisa's case, after all —, while thinking about things like that, as Makoto is viewing the fifth graders' time trial, Nagisa stood on top of the starting block. The second event of breaststroke is about to begin. He wonders just how much energy could possibly be in that body, which appears to be so delicate even compared to the other fifth graders?

Setting his toes at the edge of the starting block, Nagisa bends down. And then putting his hands at the edge of the starting block, he waits for the signal.

"On your mark."

—Silence—

The whistle sounded. The eight of them dive in all at once. Nagisa's landing point is closer than the other swimmers'. One pull, one kick. He's in third place when his head emerged from the water. He's about two heads behind the top position. Though it can't be called a good position, without seeming to be in a hurry, it didn't feel like he was exerting his strength. Rather, he's swimming with more leisurely strokes than usual.

Even if it's the same breaststroke, everyone has their differing rhythms and styles. Those like Nagisa, who paddle a lot of water with huge strokes. Those who aim to speed up by doing many more rotations. If there are those who make their powerfulness felt, there are also those who cut through the water with sharpness of a knife.

Around having passed the 20m mark, drawing closer to the swimmer in front bit by bit, though he lines up with second place, they pulled apart again at the turn. Even so, when he lines up with the second place swimmer again, perhaps because that swimmer started to be hasty, it subtly broke their rhythm. And then, they trailingly fall back to third in that state.

In the remaining 10m, coming up again bit by bit, the difference between Nagisa and the top position almost completely disappeared. At the moment it seemed like the outcome would depend on the difference of the touch, the opponent superior in height being advantageous, Nagisa's hand stretched out just before the goal. And as his hand touches the surface of the wall, the outcome was decided.

Lifting his head from the surface of the water, Nagisa looks around nervously. Informed of the time and ranking, his expression completely changed. Raising his right fist as high as he can, he expresses his joy while jumping up in the water.

When Makoto gives him a round of applause, he reciprocated it with a huge wave of his hand.

"You're amazing, Nagisa! You did it!"

Makoto showing him a thumbs up, Nagisa imitated it, too. With his arms folded, his mouth hanging half open, Rin almost went into a state of shock.

"He really..... did it."

Those were the words that finally came out.

Upon hearing the sound of someone diving in, when Makoto turns around, Haruka was swimming. Did he start swimming after seeing Nagisa's time trial? Or did that timing happen just by accident? He probably wouldn't tell him even if he asked, but supposing that perhaps he was worried about Nagisa, that was something Haruka hadn't done before. It's possible that something is subtly changing within Haruka.

Unable to hold down what was welling up in his chest, Makoto dived into the lane beside Haruka.

While Rin was taking a shower, he called out to the shower room next to him.

"Nanase, what'll you do?"

"About what?"

"About Nagisa. He really did come in first."

"Sure looks like it."

Haruka's mumbling voice is almost drowned out by the shower's noise. Feeling a lack in the response that didn't seem admiring, Rin raised his voice, a little irritated.

"So, what are you gonna do?"

Instead of a reply, he heard the sound of the shower curtain opening. Blowing out a large breath through his nose, Rin washed his hair like he was trying to tear it off.

When Haruka entered the changing rooms, Makoto and Nagisa were already there.

"Nanase-kun, you saw me."

Nagisa runs up to him with such energy that it seems like he's about to jump at him.

"Yeah, I saw."

To that reply, Nagisa shows a full smile.

"That's the first time I came in first, you know."

"I see."

It's an ordinary answer, seeming half-interested and half-indifferent. But it's clear from that smile that it's enough for Nagisa.

When he finds Rin coming out of the shower room, he asked the main question without delay.

"So, it's about the promise, Matsuoka-kun."

Modestly stopping his words, Nagisa looks up at Rin with big round eyes. Even without knowing the context of conversation, the mention of a promise with Nagisa, it could only be one thing.

"I did promise. Nagisa's a member for the medley relay, too."

As soon as Rin finishes speaking, Nagisa turns around to face Haruka.

"I did it! I'm on the same team as Nanase-kun!"

"You sure are."

Haruka's nonchalant reply grazes by Rin and Makoto's ears. Since he said it so readily, it came close to passing unheard. Makoto looks at Haruka, his eyes widening.

"Haru, just now—"

"Nanase, that true?"

Rin's words overlap with Makoto's. They couldn't help but ask again.

"Are you really going to swim in the medley relay?"

"Well, I intend to."

To Haruka's blunt response, Rin can't hide his delight.

"We did it, we did it, Tachibana!"

Facing Makoto with his fists clenched in triumph, he shouted out more enthusiastically than Nagisa.

"Yeah!"

"All right, starting today, we're a team. From tomorrow, we'll train real hard!"

Makoto and Nagisa nod. Haruka was drying his head with a towel.

"Oh yeah, let's call each other by name from now on. We'll feel more like comrades that way. As such, Nanase is Haru."

Haruka's hand, that he's drying his head with, stops for a moment. Hidden by the towel, his face can't be seen. But he went back to drying his head right away.

"As for Tachibana, Makoto."

"There's nothing different about it."

Makoto laughed amusedly, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"Hey, what about me?"

"As for Nagisa, it's fine to stick with Nagisa, the same as before. And, call me leader."

"Huh?"

Nagisa raised his voice, sounding displeased.

"You're wrong. There's no such name as 'leader', is there?"

Makoto laughing, Rin puts both his hands on his waist, amazed.

"Listen here, the 'leader' is the greatest person on the team, taking care of everyone, they're kind of like a manager."

"Really? Still, 'leader' is weird. Wouldn't 'Rinrin' be okay?"

"Ah...."

Rin stiffens up, his mouth dropping. Makoto laughs, clutching his stomach. Drying his head, Haruka's back shook a little. Nagisa points at Makoto and Haruka.

"And so, Mako-chan and Haru-chan."

Makoto's laughter stopping, Haruka's towel fell to the floor.

"I can't wait for tomorrow. The relay is teamwork, after all, right? We have to try our best together. Let's practice a lot."

There was an atmosphere like no other in the changing rooms, only Nagisa's voice resounded, with a cheerfulness that is mindful of spring.

"Morning, Nanase-kun."

Entering the classroom, Aki's cheerful voice leapt into his ears.

"Hey."

For now, he just gives a minimum reply.

"I heard you're doing the relay."

He takes an extensive view of the classroom. Makoto isn't there yet. Rin has his textbook and notebooks out, feigning ignorance. He determined the source of the information to be Rin.

"For the time being."

He was stubbornly trying to show that it wasn't certain, but it didn't seem like Aki caught on to it.

"I'm glad. I really thought that it would be nice if Nanase-kun would swim in the relay. But it bothered me a little that I couldn't say it well at the time."

It's nothing to be worried about. Around him, there are meddlesome guys whom even others would call unpleasant. While thinking that, he mentioned something else.

"What about your team?"

"Yeah, it's going well. Only little by little, but we shorten our time every day."

That's what it means to be in the relay. You can't swim for just your own sake. Victory or defeat, responsibility, teamwork, he becomes influenced by such things. All the things that Haruka had avoided were packed into that.

Until now, he swam while seeking a place in the water where he could be released from his ties. However, swimming in the relay means that he'll be creating ties in that water.

"I want to see it soon, Nanase-kun swimming together with everyone. I think that Nanase-kun's team will surely come in first place. Since everybody's fast."

"It's not my team."

Once he cuts his words short, he draws in a deep breath. And then, he lifted his voice so Rin could hear it.

"Rinrin's the leader."

Rin's shoulders jump. All eyes in the class concentrating on Rin, after a moment of silence, they laughed. Aki couldn't keep herself from bursting out either.

Standing up, Rin comes over to where Haruka is, while squaring his shoulders. When they thought that he was intending to vent his worked up feelings at Haruka, regaining his composure just by taking a deep breath, he spoke in a voice that only Haruka and Aki could hear.

"Look, at my previous school, they always called me 'Rin-chan' and teased me with it. I changed schools because I detested it, so please, drop that. If I'm called 'Rinrin', I might end up changing schools again."

That is something Haruka didn't know. He wasn't even interested in what Rin was like at his previous school. In the first place, the story itself about getting teased is suspicious.

"I'm sorry."

Aki apologized instead of Haruka.

"Nah, why are you apologizing, Yazaki-san?"

"Because I laughed, too. I had no idea that you were teased."

"Oh, I see. I'm shy, so I didn't answer to it. Then the teasing steadily got worse, until it became real serious."

"Oh, really?"

Aki asked with an earnest expression. Even though there's no way a shy guy would call himself shy. Going past being suspicious, it could only be thought of as aiming for a laugh. But he's not so good-natured as to laugh over something like this.

When he thought that he couldn't go along with this stupidity anymore, Makoto entered the classroom with his good timing.

"Morning, Haru. Zaki-chan. And, uh, Rinrin, was it?"

"Hey, you shouldn't say that."

Sooner than Rin, Aki said it to Makoto with an earnest expression.

"Eh, really? But I thought we decided on 'Rinrin' yesterday."

"Apparently, he was teased at his previous school because of the name."

"Teased? Who?"

"Matsuoka-kun, obviously."

The good-natured Makoto laughs, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"You shouldn't laugh."

Since Aki says it so earnestly, Makoto somehow managed to suppress his laughter.

"Sorry, sorry. But there's no one here who would tease you over that, so you can relax."

When Makoto said that, the bell rang, like the gong signaling the end of the boring match.

When March came, as the sunlight grew warmer, small buds beginning to sprout on all kinds of trees, the birds' chirping became energetic little by little. The wind blows again today on Mutsukibashi. But before they noticed it, the wind had lost its intense coldness. Haruka and Makoto's breaths aren't white anymore. Turning into vapor that held its temperature transparently, it blends into the wind. From behind Haruka, Nagisa joined up

with them at almost the same time as Rin catches up.

"I'm not resting, you know. I stepped in place all along."

Nagisa's breathing is pretty rough. Rin's breath overlaps with his.

"You say the same thing every day."

"Because I keep stepping in place all along every day."

"That's why you don't really need to say it every day."

Rin was sort of irritated today. To the point that he picks a fight with Nagisa's childish words.

"Rinrin, you say the same thing every day, too. Such as, we're a team....."

Before Nagisa finishes speaking, Rin talks over him.

"Listen here, Nagisa. My name is 'Rin.' Not 'Rinrin', you know."

"Eh, really? That complicated character isn't read as 'Rinrin'? But, oh well, whatever."

"What?"

"It can stay as 'Rinrin', right?"

He was seeking Haruka's consent, not Rin's.

"Sure."

"Haru, you." [you = omae, used in a derogatory sense. it'd be kind of like 'damn it, haru']

Makoto steps in front of Rin, who looks like he's about to snap at Haruka.

"You shouldn't, Nagisa. If you call him 'Rinrin', he might end up changing schools again."

"Alright then, 'Rin-chan' is fine. Sheesh, you sure are selfish."

As Rin is about to say something to Nagisa, Haruka speeds up.

"I'm gonna leave you behind if you chatter."

Makoto lightly patted Nagisa on the back."

"Nagisa, don't fall behind."

The four hot breaths ran through, like the wind on the embankment alongside the river approaching the spring.

Even Nagisa's breathing, that was still rough in the changing rooms in the beginning, by now it had completely settled down. Perhaps he's gotten used to running. As Haruka is thinking about that, Rin, who had finished changing before him, suddenly raised his voice, putting both his hands on his waist.

"Listen up, everyone."

— We can hear you without being so loud. What are you getting so fired up for?

Without saying anything, Haruka complained through his eyes. But it didn't seem like Rin caught on to it. He lifts his voice again.

"I think we all know that the tournament is near. Therefore, I think we should try and change how we practice a little."

Makoto listens while putting on his cap.

"Change it how?"

"I'm thinking a practice schedule focused on the medley relay, or like, let's narrow down our practice to just the medley relay."

"Hooray!"

Nagisa was delighted, throwing up both his hands in no time. Since becoming a member, Nagisa had wanted to do relay practice one way or another. Perhaps it could be summed up as it's just what he's been wishing for.

In contrast, Makoto shows an uneasy expression.

"What'll we do about the other practices?"

"We won't."

"We won't.....?"

"I want to concentrate just on the medley relay practice."

Rin's hot glance coils around the bewildered Makoto.

"But, unless we practice, we won't be able to swim properly in the tournament."

"As for the other races——"

Cutting his words short, Rin looks at Makoto. Then, he looks at Haruka.

"No participating."

A silence occupying the air of the changing rooms, its density grew heavier. In that air, Haruka's words, that aren't yelled nor are they criticizing, hang in midair like as if he's talking to himself.

"Who decided that?"

"It's not decided yet. We're deciding it now. I won't be in any contest other than the medley relay. So that's why I was thinking of wanting everyone to do the same. Unless we do, unless we do that much, I don't think we can win."

Haruka closing the locker's door like he's striking it, a sound resounded that made his ears hurt.

"Beat who? How many seconds do they swim? Why do I have to follow your lead?"

"Haru!"

Makoto steps in between them. Haruka thought that it's good timing. He doesn't intend to argue with Rin any further, on the other hand, he didn't intend to follow Rin's method, either. Being dragged into it and sticking with his opinion, both were troublesome. Acting by his own intentions——, it's enough if he conveyed just that. So, Makoto's interruption was good timing.

He quickly wants to go to a place where Rin's heat doesn't reach. He quickly wants to sink his body in the water.

As he silently turns to the side, Makoto asked a question.

"Haru, we're in the relay together as a team. No matter what happens, that won't change, right?"

He doesn't intend to abandon them. It's not that he decided on it with half-hearted feelings. That's why he intended to see it through to the end. That feeling hasn't changed, nor did he intend to change it.

As he silently turns to the side without replying, Makoto breathed out a small breath and

faced Rin.

"Why are you so obsessed with the relay? If you have a reason for it, then tell us."

Rin's firm attitude didn't break. Keeping his hands on his waist, he looks at Haruka, past Makoto. Perhaps he was prepared for an opposing opinion. For this reason, he aims to show the strength of his intention with a firm attitude.

"I don't intend to force you all, but if we really plan on winning the relay, we have to do at least that much. If I do it at all, I definitely want to be the champion. That's my reason."

Winning and being the champion, those words that aren't a reason for Haruka to act on, spew out of Rin's mouth.

—I don't swim for the sake of things like that.

Then, what do you swim for? Not wanting to be asked that, Haruka remained silent. Makoto shows a confused expression, pulling close his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"Wait a bit. I want to be the champion, too, but only practicing for the relay seems a little..... I want to be in the bure and I intend on being in free, too."

At the previous tournament, Makoto was in the 100m breaststroke and became the champion. Rin is the champion at both breaststroke and free at 50m. However, Rin is saying to concentrate on the medley relay, to the extent of throwing aside the contests that they're contenders in. It would be weirder to not be confused by such an incomprehensible suggestion.

"Can we get a little time to think about it? And, for the time being, can we practice as usual today?"

As Makoto says that, lowering his hands from his waist, Rin went back to his usual smile.

Alongside an exhaled breath, the heat it carried dispersing, it disappears into the changing rooms.

"Sorry, suddenly suggesting something like that. Of course, it's your personal freedom as to what you do, it's not something I can complain about. However, for now, I want you to at least understand that that's how I feel about it."

As Makoto nods, Nagisa, who was silent until then, looked up at Rin.

"I'll do the medley relay practice with Rin-chan. And I'll only be in the medley relay, too!"

Rin smiles broadly. Whatever the reason, Nagisa accepted Rin's selfish suggestion.

"Thanks, Nagisa. But, my practice is pretty strict."

"It's okay. Because I'm the best among the fifth graders."

From Nagisa saying that while sticking out his chest, Rin gets fired up.

"Alright, then, let's practice at once!"

The rubber of his goggles making a sound as Rin snaps it, Nagisa imitated that.

"Yeah!"

While looking at the backs of the two heading to the pool, Haruka felt like he's gotten lost in a thick fog. What happened earlier, it's as if it can't be seen. He thought that he's sorry for being swallowed in it. And yet, he's already ended up being totally soaked. The more he thinks about how it can't be swept away, the fog's thick density just kept growing.

Chapter Five: Stroke

The water's surface swayed, raising small splashes. One pull, one kick. The ripples spreading out, Nagisa's head rises to the surface past them. And then, pushing his way through the water with unhurried breaststrokes, he comes back after making the turn. That way of swimming was a little different from when he did the time trial.

On top of the starting block, Rin watched Nagisa's swimming while feeling that something was wrong. Touching the wall's surface with both hands, Nagisa lifts his face from the water. Rin, who was supposed to dive in by passing Nagisa overhead, remained standing on the starting block.

"What happened, Rin-chan?"

Among his uneven breathing, he asked intermittently. Squatting on the starting block, Rin peered at Nagisa's face from just above him.

"Hey you, were you swimming with all your strength just now?"

"Yeah."

Behind the goggles, Nagisa's big round eyes look straight up at Rin. Nor unease, nor doubt, nor falsehood can be found in those eyes. Even so, Rin attempted to peek even deeper into Nagisa's eyes. However, soon realizing that it's not necessary, he diverted his gaze. Nagisa's eyes were endlessly transparent, without even the tiniest impurity in them. To the extent that it was even clearly visible behind his goggles.

Nagisa doesn't attempt to hide what he's thinking. From the start, he doesn't happen to have thoughts that people would feel ashamed over. He was capable of honestly believing, honestly expressing himself. That is what Nagisa's like. That sort of thing was the hardest to do for Rin. In the case of a guy who deceives people and evades things, a part of him somewhere feeling that he has a debt to pay, makes a gap in his heart. Keeping the truth hidden, Rin himself had created a gap in his heart, too.

But there's no such gap at all in Nagisa.

"Compared to the time trial, didn't you change your way of swimming?"

"It's the same."

Somehow, it appears that the person himself hasn't noticed. Perhaps it's the kind of thing where you often don't know it about yourself. Things like subjective impressions and ideals getting in the way, it's possible that it can't be seen well.

"Your time dropped."

"Really?"

Taking off his goggles, Nagisa peers at Rin from below. Into the very depths of his eyes. Standing up, Rin escaped from Nagisa's gaze.

"The way you did it before, it was faster."

In the swimming race, it couldn't have been a fluke—. That was Rin's theory. A time that went up once is not something that drops like that. It's especially true for them, in their growth period. Being in the growth period means not only in terms of constitution and physical strength, but it also includes technique and spirit.

"That's strange, I wonder why? I really didn't change my way of swimming."

"Hey you, when you're competing, can you see your opponent?"

"Yeah, I can see them perfectly."

"Then, that's it. It's about whether or not you have the feeling of wanting to swim faster than your opponent. Without you knowing it, it's that feeling that made Nagisa faster."

"I can swim faster because of a feeling?"

"Sure can."

The strength of their feelings makes a person grow. To the extent that it could occasionally even be called evolution, there are times when it causes a dramatic change. That's the reason why Nagisa displayed a swim exceeding his true strength during the time trial. Thus, it's not that difficult to change a limit with one's true strength once it had been exceeded. That was the privilege they had, being in the growth period.

"Wanna try swimming with me?"

"With Rin-chan? But, I think I'll lose."

"I'll go easy on you."

There was no reason to swim with as much speed as Nagisa's produced time.

"If you overtake me, it means that Nagisa's personal record has improved."

"Yeah."

The two of them standing lined up on the starting blocks, they matched their breathing. Then Rin quietly speaks.

"Let's go. On your mark, bang."

Landing on the water at roughly the same distance, the ripples spread. One pull, one kick. Nagisa's head rising, Rin's head rose a little ahead of him. Nagisa ends up falling behind after all. It's not simple to shorten the difference that occurred at the start. In Nagisa's case, there was a problem with his angle at the time of diving. Conversely, if he were to correct that, it means that his time can still go up. But that's not a simple thing, either.

Near his lower back, Rin felt the sensation of Nagisa's fingertips stretching forward on the water's surface. They make the turn at 25m without the difference widening or shortening. Where they crossed the remaining 15m, it felt like Nagisa's fingertips stretched a little further. The difference doesn't shorten. When he thought that perhaps it's just his imagination, Nagisa's arms stretched forward all of a sudden. It wasn't his fingertips, it wasn't his imagination, his arms distinctly stretched forward. It came rushing with an energy that seemed like it could pierce the tip of Rin's shoulder. A chill runs down Rin's back.

He finally understood the reason why the swimmer's rhythm was broken by Nagisa seeming to have caught up to him during the time trial.

The difference shortens with each stroke. Nagisa's arm capturing Rin's chin, he glances ahead. With around 5m remaining, Nagisa's head was about to line up with Rin's. In Rin's eyes, Nagisa was no longer Nagisa, he couldn't perceive him as anything other than something mysterious.

—I'm being overtaken!

The moment he thought that, Rin put strength into his shoulders. Then, as he reaches the goal with a difference of one head between them, he climbed up onto the poolside. While breathing so hard that you wouldn't think that he only swam 50m at best.

It wasn't a lie when he said that he'll go easy on him. He was also confident in reproducing Nagisa's best time within a 0.5 second margin of error. And yet, why did he end up straining himself in the final moments? In a single word, it would be called 'terror'.

It wasn't because fighting instinct had welled up, nor because he had gotten serious. Frightened of Nagisa gaining on him, he ended up running away from him. And then,

unable to endure even being in the same water as Nagisa, he ended up rushing out of the pool. From the water, Nagisa looks up at Rin, who's standing still on the poolside while water trickles down on him.

"What happened, Rin-chan?"

Rin couldn't look directly at Nagisa's face.

— Why was I frightened of someone like Nagisa?

He tried asking himself the question, but no answer came. Feeling like he could see right through inside his chest if their eyes were to meet, Rin spoke as he turned to the side.

"You can do it if you try, huh."

"I couldn't do it. I mean, I couldn't catch up, could I?"

No, he caught up. Nagisa was supposed to have caught up to his personal best. If Rin hadn't ran way.

"Hey, your arms —"

As he began to speak, Rin's voice chokes up.

"Yeah."

It was Nagisa's usual voice. Nagisa, who's a teammate and whose presence was like a little brother's. By no means was he the likes of 'something mysterious'. Breathing out the air he was holding in his chest, Rin could finally look at Nagisa.

"Your arms stretched forward."

"Mine?"

Saying that, Nagisa looked at his right arm.

"That's right. In the second half, you were gaining on. That's when your arm stretched forward."

"Is that so? I had no idea at all, though."

"Hey you, while swimming, what were you thinking about?"

"Just that I'll definitely catch up."

He says it easily. Perhaps he doesn't think about things like his own form and rhythm.

Everyone has their own form and rhythm that suits them. It's not easy to discover it, it turns out to be different even if you think you discovered it, and sometimes it ends up passing by before you knew it. Rin is still in the middle of continuing to search for it, while repeating trial and error. So, he always swam while thinking about it, he never once swam recklessly. Even if he swam with all his strength, he can't think of raising his time, either.

However, he also knew that sometimes, an ability to concentrate that's close to its limits can bring forth the best form, like a miracle. The ability to concentrate is, in other words, the strength of feelings. Indeed, he told Nagisa that you can swim faster because of a feeling, but it was unexpected that it would be apparent so distinctly.

"Hey you, can you swim like that once more?"

"Hmm, I'm not really sure."

It's a natural reply, since he's swimming without being conscious of his form. Somehow, it seems that Nagisa is the type who masters things by personal experience.

"Wanna try swimming with me again?"

"Yeah."

Nagisa climbs up on the poolside. Although he has a delicate and short body, how does he produce that kind of catching-up? Perhaps there could be a hint in it for the best form that Rin is seeking. While thinking about this and that, he stands up on the starting block.

"Let's go."

One breath.

"On your mark, bang."

Rin and Nagisa's feet dancing in the air, their bodies are sucked up by the water. Is their goal 50m ahead, or is it farther away? Without even knowing where they're headed, for now they just repeat doing the strokes. Strong, fast. While thinking of nothing but that.

The swimmers in the same events making groups, each one practiced separately. Since the tournament was approaching, it's for the sake of placing emphasis on their specialty event. Usually, Makoto would join the breaststroke group in this period, but this time he was in the backstroke group.

With Haruka in free, Rin in butterfly, Nagisa in breaststroke, it becomes inevitable for Makoto to be in the backstroke.

It's not because he can't swim it, nor because he is weak in it. However, he has never swum it in the tournament before. So, since his time hasn't been measured yet, in a sense, it's an event that he hasn't properly swum in. That sense meaning, with the S-shaped pull.

Until now, he swam with the straight pull, following the standard. Swimming with arms stretched straight out, like a boat's oars, but the loss becomes greater, you can't pick up speed that much. In the case of a boat's oars, just paddling with the left and right simultaneously is still better than nothing, in order to paddle by alternating in backstroke, without advancing straight ahead, by paddling too strong, it ends up causing a goldfish motion. In addition, at the start and end of paddling, because the strength ends up dispersing, you can't acquire enough propulsion power.

On the other hand, there's no futility in the movements with the S-shaped pull, theoretically you can swim faster in it than with the straight pull, but since the movements become more complicated, and unless you're used to it, you end up unnecessarily receiving the water's resistance.

Seizing his grip with both hands, from a stance where both his feet were pushed against the wall, with one forceful push, pulling his body forward, he kicked his feet diagonally. His body is only in the air for a moment, then the world immediately transforms into being within the water. When he makes the landing on the water, from his feet in their stretched state, he commences the flutter kick. Strokes while rising to the surfacing. Then, the S-shaped pull.

Ah, he thought. Huh?, he thought. It was different. It's different from usual. Usually, when he dives in, from getting a feeling like the monster is tearing into him to taste him, his body starts to cower, that wasn't the case now. The sensation of being tasted is there. However, his body doesn't cower.

His arms stretch out. He thought it was his swimming. He's not running away from the water. Maybe this is his true self. Maybe this is his true swimming.

From the entry, he catches, like deeply paddling the water. Then, while drawing arcs close to his body, he pulls, like throwing a ball. Pushing while deeply paddling again. At the same time as that, making the entry by firmly stretching out his recovery hand.

He could see the sky. Looking through the club's ceiling, he can see the sky. Although he

feels the monster's presence, when he's looking at the sky, his body didn't cower. It wasn't necessary to shake it off, nor to run away from it. Even if he swims with might and main, it wasn't with all his strength.

Making the turn, he commences the strokes again. It's different after all. Could it be because he's swimming without seeing the bottom of the water where the monster lurks? Or could it be because he's looking at the sky? He thinks that's also possible. However, the biggest primary factor was his way of swimming. He can feel the streamline. Even without being conscious of the correct stance, his body naturally aims to produce that figure. Markedly stretching before he could think about it, he was able to ride on the water. He feels the water.

— Perhaps I'm a marine mammal.

Perhaps he was a creature of the sea, called a marine animal, from the start. He thinks it's foolish. However, he couldn't think of it any other way. If that weren't the case, what is this sensation of perfection? This satisfying feeling, where could it possibly be gushing forth from? This feeling that he hadn't experienced until now, releases Makoto into the water.

Even after climbing up on the poolside, he was still in high spirits. While trying to suppress that feeling somehow, he walks towards the bench. Aki was sitting on the bench.

"Huh? Zaki-chan is in bakku, too?"

He tried talking to her a little.

"Ah, Tachibana-kun. No, I'm in free."

"Were you taking a break?"

"Yeah..... Just thinking a little."

"About the medley relay?"

".....No."

"Ah, I get it. About planting the flowerbed tomorrow, right?"

Since the bricks were finally baked, it was decided that Makoto's class will pile them up tomorrow. The duties are assigned to each class, such as the job of putting in the soil and watering. The job that became a problem was that they have to use cement for piling up the bricks. Even if they were taught how to do it, some voiced their worry over being

able to do it well.

"No. That's fine now, since the plasterers will be coming. They said they'd plaster the cement, too."

"If that's the case, you should ask Haru."

"Eh? Nanase-kun? But, isn't it difficult?"

"It's all right. Haru laid out the bricks in his house's garden."

"In the garden?"

"Yeah. When you walk in the garden, the soil ends up sticking, right? Because of that, on rainy days, since the entranceway gets dirty, he ended up making a pathway from bricks and cement. He did it well. It's just 1 meter, though."

"Ohh, so that's how it is. He sure is skillful."

He senses a shadow somewhere in the smile that Aki shows.

"But, what you were thinking about, it wasn't that, was it?"

"Yeah..... It's about Nanase-kun."

"About Haru?"

"I'm practicing free all the time now, too, but I was wondering why Nanase-kun only swims free?"

Why would she care about something like that? Even though it's not something that started now. While transferring his gaze over to Haruka's group swimming free, he asked Aki.

"Why about something like that?"

"Nanase-kun's free is really fast, right? So, I was thinking about what kind of feelings he swims with. If I could understand those feelings a little bit, maybe I'd become faster, too."

Makoto's eyes catch Haruka. Even from a distance, he knew right away. With an elegance like a dolphin's, he swims in a relaxed manner. Perhaps Haruka feels the water, too?

"Haru doesn't really swim because he likes it."

"Eh?"

"He doesn't particularly like free, either."

"But, in that case, why.....?"

Makoto returns his gaze that was turned towards the free group to Aki.

"It's not that I've asked him, but the meaning of swimming for Haru is a bit different than it is for us."

"What do you mean by that?"

Staring at Makoto, Aki blinks. As if Makoto was like a rare creature or something.

"For Haru, being in the water is natural."

"Eh?"

"Because of that, the most natural form is surely free."

"Is it something like, natural ability?"

"Yeah. If you were to say it in a single word, instinct, perhaps. I think it's like asking a dolphin or a whale why they're in the sea."

Makoto himself had felt something close to that just earlier. He can't clearly declare that that's the way it is. But he thinks that perhaps it's not that far away from it.

"If that were the case, then maybe I can't understand it."

"Nobody can understand it. Haru's true feelings...."

Aki turns her eyes towards the free group. To Haruka swimming among them.

"Well, I'm going back to practicing."

While saying that, he turned his back to Aki.

"Yeah."

While feeling it from the smallness of the reply that Aki's gaze was turned towards Haruka, he went back to the backstroke group.

The baked bricks were placed underneath the cherry blossom. The lumps of clay that had been burned light brown in color were systematically piled up, wearing a reddish tinge from the iron's oxidation, while the spring-like light of the sun shone on them.

Bags of cement and metal buckets, as well as small tools were placed beside it. The boys' job is to pour water over the cement. Whirling up as the seal is cut, the grey powder soon settled down. Whirling up as the shovel is thrust into it, whirling up as it's moved into the bucket, whirling up again as water is poured into it, then it soon settled down.

On both sides of the cherry blossom, a not too deep rectangle is dug. It appears that the plan is to have the flower bed there. Driving in stakes at the four corners, stretching a yarn between them, while affirming the horizontality with the yarn, they lay down the bricks one level at a time. Lining up the bricks while plastering them with cement, after they're finished with a level, plastering cement on it again, they line up the second level of bricks. The work advances following such a procedure.

The work of plastering the cement was the difficulty of the problem. Caution and skillfulness is required while evening the height, since they had to line up the bricks at regular intervals.

As they had arranged it previously, they carried the tools to Haruka's side. Without wavering or hesitating, taking the tools into his hand, Haruka headed towards the cherry blossom.

Carrying the bricks is the girls' job. Haruka lines up those carried bricks while plastering them.

"Sorry, Nanase-kun. For asking you to do something difficult."

Aki said while handing over the brick to Haruka.

"Not really. I've done it before and the plasterers explained it, too."

He replied without looking at Aki. He has to steadily concentrate, down to his fingertips. If he was even a little careless, the cement becoming wavy, the bricks would end up slanting. There was a message written on each of the bricks. If those distract him, suddenly the trowel end almost ends up being shaken.

Haruka just concentrated only on plastering the cement. Chasing away his resistance against planting a flower bed around the cherry blossom to somewhere in his heart, too.

"Looking good."

Rin called out from behind. Since he wasn't seeking a reply, he doesn't act like he heard it. He continues working, scooping up the cement from the plank.

"Maybe I'll give it a try, too."

— Without going out of your way to say it, if you want to do it, just go ahead and do it.

After he heard Rin's footsteps going far off, suddenly, he noticed that the cement is becoming faintly wavy. Did he lose his composure just from Rin calling out to him? He clicks his tongue a little in his mind.

Rin coming back after a short while, he sat down on the opposite side of Haruka. Using the plasterer trowel he held in his right hand, he smoothes out the cement with surprisingly delicate movements. The distance between Haruka and Rin is less than 2 m. He thought that it's an unpleasant distance. If they were a bit closer, he could plainly run away, if they were a bit farther apart, it wouldn't be the appropriate distance for having a conversation anymore.

"Haru, starting tomorrow, I'm thinking of measuring the time."

As he thought, he came to talk.

"I'm thinking of practicing the contest format....."

He expressively cuts his words short. He's not deciding it on his own like usual. He thinks it's a faint hearted thing to do for Rin.

"I don't really mind."

Expressionlessly as usual, he replies without taking his eyes off of the bricks. While thinking that they don't particularly need to have this conversation now.

Rin nodded a little, seeming satisfied.

"Nagisa's gotten faster."

He knows. They're on the same team for the moment.

"That kid's arms stretch out."

"....."

"It's the upkick. It looks like Nagisa hasn't noticed it himself, but when he pulls his legs in, they turn up. But it looks like it only comes out when he's going for first."

"....."

"And then, as long as he could do the start properly, that kid will become even faster."

That may be true, but it's not something they have to talk about now in particular. Won't he quiet down?

"I'm thinking of teaching Nagisa about game sense, or rather, timing or something like the ability to concentrate."

— Do you have enough of something to teach it?

Shaking off the light irritation, Haruka concentrated on the movements of the trowel. He pays attention so the cement won't become wavy. He didn't want to care about what Rin was saying anymore.

Finally finishing the first level, he stands up and takes a breath. He has to pile up three levels in total. The sun still high, it seemed like he would finish by evening. He thinks that he wants to go to the swimming club, if he can finish a little earlier. He thought that he doesn't mind even if it's just ten minutes, he wants to swim.

As he looks at Rin, he was already about to finish the first level. He carefully completes it, even smoothening out the surface. It makes him admire that while chatting so much, it's skillfully handled.

"Haru, I brought the refill."

Makoto carried the metal bucket with the cement in it with both hands, looking heavy. Placing it in front of Haruka, he takes a breath. The bucket is full of cement, he could easily imagine how heavy it is. Requiring two people to be finally able to carry it would be normal for an elementary school student.

It feels like lately, Makoto's body has grown another size bigger. Not especially because he's gotten taller, but it gives off an impression like he's wearing some sort of armor.

"I wonder if we can make it to practice today."

Makoto's carefree tone was well-matched to the blue sky welcoming the springtime. Rin stands up, having finished the first level.

"I just told Haru about it, but I'm thinking of practicing the contest format starting tomorrow. Measuring the time, too."

"Right. The tournament's getting closer, huh?"

Leaving it to Makoto to talk with Rin, Haruka started working on the second level. He

wanted to work in silence. Without thinking about anything, forgetting that this is the graduation project, even that he's under the cherry blossom, chasing it away to somewhere, he wanted to finish it as just work.

— I want to hurry up and sink my body in the water.

He made that his only thought.

The wind that grazes his cheek carries the gentleness of spring. He wanted to hurry up and get in the water for the sake of shaking off its lukewarm sensation, too.

When spring comes, Kotsuzumiyama grows a little taller. Since it's only a head smaller than Myoujinyama, from ancient times, they compared the two mountains to brothers. At the time that leaf buds start blowing on Kotsuzumiyama, just like a little brother standing on his tiptoes to catch up with his big brother, it grows only a little bit taller.

It doesn't mean that the mountain's height actually changes. It seems that the plants' distribution and the trees' increase, by the color of the sky and such, make it look like that.

While wiping away the sweat trickling down his cheek and falling, Haruka was approaching Mutsukibashi. Although his pace is faster than usual, the temperature is considerably higher, too. Makoto and Rin probably aren't coming today. Nagisa had left long ago. It's been a while since he crossed the bridge alone. The wind blew again today on the bridge. He got the impression that it's been a while since he felt the wind while running, too. Originally, he intended to run alone like this. It wasn't part of Haruka's plans at all to run with Nagisa and Rin. The same is true for swimming in a team.

He thought that swimming was fundamentally an individual sport, with relay being an extension of it. Therefore, carrying out practice individually being the rational approach, there was supposed to be no need whatsoever to fuss over being in a team.

Supposing that if this was baseball or soccer, things such as formation and coordinated play, and certainly team play as well, would become necessary. Understanding each other's abilities, covering for each of them, power and balance as a whole has to be prepared. There are also things like breathing and eye contact for example, unless you practice, you can't possibly do them.

But eye contact and formation isn't necessary in swimming. Once you dive in, you're alone. Displaying the strength each of them possesses, it doesn't matter just as long as they swim fast. There isn't supposed to be anything else to think about.

Rin talking heatedly, Makoto shouting that it's no good without Haruka, Nagisa wanting to be a member, being told by Aki that he should swim.

Could it be that there's something more in the contest called relay? He thought that if there's something to it that he doesn't know about, even if he pays the price, perhaps there's a value in giving it a try. Even if the price he has to pay is other people interfering, cooperating against his will, being coerced to do things that go against his own intentions.

It's something that he had decided on once he was prepared. He didn't intend to simply go back on it. That's why, if it's necessary for the relay, he didn't have a reason to refuse, nor did he intend to refuse to swim and run, the four of them together. It's just that Haruka hasn't detected a special significance of any sort in the contest called relay. It's only that he continues to swim in the water, with ties clinging to him.

When he comes out onto the poolside from the changing rooms, Nagisa came by, clinging to him.

"Haru-chan, what were you doing? You're late. What about Rin-chan and Mako-chan?"

He feels out of tune. Even compared to himself from a year ago, Nagisa was too childish. It's hard to think of him as someone to push away or neglect. Even now, he doesn't really know how he should treat him. That said, he won't become good-natured enough to return courtesies.

He decided to deal with him like his usual self, as much as possible. While feeling the contradiction that his usual self is no longer what it used to be.

"It's the graduation project. They might not be coming today."

"Whaaat. But, oh well. Let's hurry and practice."

The practice Nagisa is talking about is for the relay, that is. Now, the meaning of Nagisa's swimming was all in the relay. Swimming fast, then winning. It was an objective that was simple to the point of being too precise. He notices a significance in the relay more than Haruka, at least.

Since they're equal members, would they need to have the same objective? Could that be what teamwork is? Could that be what cooperativeness is? Supposing if that's the case, Haruka will end up losing his meaning of swimming.

Nagisa stood on the starting block.

"On your mark, bang."

After saying it, Nagisa dives in. Haruka doesn't intend to say anything technical like Rin. From the start, he's never swum while being conscious of something like that. Not to mention, he's never once had interest in things like someone else's form. However, he feels it. Something like dissonance in Nagisa's swimming. But he can't express it in words, he only feels it. An uncomfortable feeling, like a metronome with its spring broken. A resistance, like a bicycle with rusted gears.

He comes back after making the 50m turn. Around passing 70m, it seemed like Nagisa's arms stretched. It felt like his arms were longer, so much that they were disproportionate to his height. At that moment, the uncomfortable feeling disappeared. Same as ever, Nagisa carves a rhythm with wide strokes. There's no sign of him particularly putting in strength or having raised the rotation of his strokes. And yet, around the remaining 15 m, he accelerates even more. And then, accelerating again on the remaining 5m, he touched the wall.

Haruka's feet kicking off from the start block, his body flutters in midair.

He heard from Rin that Nagisa had started swimming like that. However, after actually seeing it in front of his eyes, he ends up feeling it hard to understand.

Before he's aware of it, Nagisa and Kotsuzumiya overlapped in Haruka's mind. He knows that it's an optical illusion to appear like it has grown taller when spring comes. Considering that Nagisa's thing could be an optical illusion, too, he immediately denied it. Denying the fact itself that the mountain and Nagisa are overlapping, he slips his body into the water's rift like always.

It was at the time when dirt was spread out in the graduation project's flower bed and some sort of seeds were sowed in it that they started seriously practicing for the tournament. Roughly dividing a day's practice schedule into two halves, they were assigned to measure time in groups assembled from those swimming the same event in the first half and practicing relay and long distance in the second half.

At this time, the schedule became swimming free for Haruka, backstroke and breaststroke for Makoto in the first half, and participating in relay afterwards. Rin and Nagisa's practice schedule is only relay in both the first and second half. Today, Aki and Yuuki participated in Rin and Nagisa's practice, too. Occasionally, it happened that Aki's group participated in the relay practice like this. In an attempt to calm down a little the feelings of anxiety and impatience, that they wouldn't know if they weren't swimming the same relay, they

have joint practice with Rin and Nagisa.

Both of Nagisa's hands touching the surface of the wall, Rin dives in. Lifting his goggles, while his eyes express that he can still last, Nagisa looked after Rin going far off. A sigh blends in with his rough breathing.

Aki never even thought that Nagisa could try his best this much. Even though they've kept going until they've lost track of it, he doesn't voice a single complaint. He must have been quite tired. As well as his posture collapsing for the dive, his breaststroke speed is dropping, too.

Sometimes, she thinks that Haruka's team's level might be too high. Probably, Nagisa himself ought to feel something similar to that. But, perhaps it's for this reason that he's trying his best. Perhaps he earnestly thinks that he doesn't want to be someone who holds back the team.

As Nagisa tries to climb up onto the poolside, not putting enough strength into it, when it seems like he's about to fall back into the water again, Aki grabbed his arm and pulled him up.

"Thanks. Haa. Zaki-chan. Haa."

"Shall we take a little break?"

"Yeah."

Nagisa nodded, among his gasping breaths. Nagisa doesn't pretend to be tough or put on airs. He tries his best when he's told to, he takes a break when he's told to. Nagisa was always the true Nagisa.

Shaping a megaphone with both hands, Aki shouted for a meeting, Yuuki replied with an OK sign. After that, Rin touched the surface of the wall.

Nagisa takes off his cap, sinking down to the floor. Aki sat down beside him.

"Nagisa-kun, you've gotten faster, huh?"

"Yeah, but, we'll lose unless I swim faster."

"Lose, to who?"

"I dunno. Rin-chan said so."

"Hmm, I see."

Aki turned towards Rin as he was getting out of the water. Who could Rin be competing with? It always feels like he's rushing. Always seeking something, running towards somewhere. With what kind of feelings could Nagisa be chasing after Rin?

"Zaki-chan, who taught you how to dive?"

Suddenly being asked, Aki is at a loss.

"Well, I wonder how it was. But, why?"

"It's not going very well. I try a lot of things, but it's not right somehow. Rin-chan wouldn't teach me even if I asked."

"Hmm, so that's how it is. I wonder, why wouldn't he teach you?"

That was unexpected. Even though she thought that Rin was very concerned about Nagisa.

"Hey, what do you think I should do so it'll go better?"

Being asked that so directly, she's at a loss for an answer. She hadn't really thought about things like the diving form before. Aki tried to depict in her head the image of herself when she dives in. Standing on the starting block, spreading out both legs a little, she puts her thumb on the edge. Folding her body, taking a forward-bending posture, she puts both her hands on the starting block. Pulling her body with a jerk, she fixes her eyes on the goal while diving in from the recoil.

As Aki's thinking about it, she realized that Nagisa's eyes were turned towards the landing point. It probably doesn't matter where you're looking, but it feels like something is different. Though it can't be explained well with words, she ventures to say that perhaps it's about where the goal you're aiming at is. She doesn't think that it's a logical reply. But she couldn't find any other suitable answer.

"Hey, when you're diving, what if you try looking a bit farther ahead?"

"How much farther ahead?"

"Maybe something like, you'll dive until the wall on the other side."

"Hmm."

Nagisa stares at Aki with big round eyes. Being stared at with honest eyes, a strange feeling like regret spread out in her chest. She ends up blaming herself for saying something vague, which might be deceiving. Honestly, it might have been better if she

would've said that she doesn't know. Thinking that, Nagisa took his eyes off of her before she became aware of it.

"Got it. I'll give it a try."

Nagisa said that with a smile.

The signal came from Rin to resume practice. As Rin dives in, raising splashes, Nagisa headed towards the starting block.

Aki felt somewhat relieved that she had been released from Nagisa. Not because Nagisa is unpleasant. Instead, somewhat giving off the impression of a little brother, he was someone you couldn't leave alone. But even so, when she's stared at with those honest eyes, suddenly losing her confidence, she ends up wanting to run away. Though he was supposed to be like a little brother, she felt that he changed into something she didn't want to touch. As if, her true self from within her had appeared right in front of her eyes....

And then, when she thinks that's she released from Nagisa, she feels uncomfortable again.

Nagisa dives. Was his gaze focusing on the goal? Did he properly make a start that he could be satisfied with? While thinking about that, when Aki tried to take a step forward to the starting block, Rin called her to a halt as he climbed out of the pool.

"Yazaki-san. Did you say something to Nagisa?"

Even though he was swimming until just now, not a single breath was irregular. He didn't speak in a particularly criticizing tone, but it strangely made her feel self-conscious.

"Yeah, about the dive."

Rin looks back at Nagisa.

"As I thought. I kinda thought his start just now was a little different."

"....It's about where he looks."

"Eh?"

"When diving in, I told him that he should look at the goal."

"Ah, so that's it."

"Matsuoka-kun, why don't you teach Nagisa-kun?"

Passing the 25m mark, Nagisa accelerates.

"Nagisa's not the type who gets faster by being molded. Even if he understands reason and theory in his head, he can't express it well with his body. But if it's something that he felt in his heart, it clearly shows in his swimming. He probably hasn't noticed it himself, though."

Aki equipped her goggles.

"Then, I might've said something unnecessary."

"Nah, I think it's good. I think that what Yazaki-san told him, was about a feeling. If it's about swimming because of a feeling, then I think it came across to Nagisa better than a half-baked theory. Really."

"Yeah."

After nodding, Aki stood on top of the starting block. Spreading out both legs a little, she puts her thumb on the edge. Folding her body, she takes a forward-bending posture. While putting both her hands on the starting block, she waits for Yuuki. Pulling her body with a jerk, she fixes her eyes on the goal while diving in from the recoil. While she flutters in midair, she tried gazing straight at her own heart.

—Like Nagisa, was I able to face swimming with honest feelings?

Asking herself the question, she begins to dislike herself for only being able to give a vague reply. While starting to feel uncomfortable for avoiding to touch on that until now, Aki raised splashes on the water's surface.

Chapter Six: Team

Some kind of sprouts slowly started to grow in the graduation project's flower bed. The girls had sown the seeds, but it seems like it was a secret from the boys as to what kind of seeds they were. Like Makoto said, perhaps they're flowers that'll bloom by the time of the graduation ceremony. It can't possibly be in time for it, though.

He looks up at the cherry blossom tree. There aren't any flower buds on it yet. It didn't seem like Rin's wish of wanting to swim in the pool with cherry blossom petals dancing in it would come true, either.

When he looks down at his feet, the light brown ground stretched out. He wonders if the cherry blossom's roots spread deep down underneath the ground. How does it feel to have something like a flower bed planted over its roots that took many years to spread? If he was the cherry blossom, how would he feel?

After considering that, a bitter smile surfaced. If he were the cherry blossom, he surely wouldn't feel anything. Something like a flower bed wouldn't catch his attention. He wouldn't be bewildered by or shunning it. As long as he could spread his large branches towards the sky, he wouldn't wish for anything else.

When he thinks about how he was the only one fussing over it, if the cherry blossom in question didn't even worry about it, he ended up smiling a little.

"Are you so happy that the buds came out? Haru."

Before he knew it, Rin and Makoto were standing right beside him.

"Not really."

He didn't intend to explain to Rin what he was thinking about. Nevertheless, denying it is bothersome, too. So, he replied like that.

"The graduation is soon, huh."

Makoto says it like he's deeply moved, while looking up at the cherry blossom.

"It really is. A farewell to the school filled with memories, too."

Like a terrible actor, Rin spoke out at random. He won't be nice enough to reply to every little thing. Like Makoto would.

"Still, it's only been two months. Shouldn't you go to the graduation ceremony at your old school?"

Rin's smile suddenly turns cold. Dropping his gaze on the flower bed, he stares at the little sprouts.

"I've properly bid farewell to Sano Elementary."

With a performance that was a little bit better for a terrible actor, he creates an expression that holds grief in it.

"Sorry. I said something unnecessary."

Makoto reacts again. Even if it wasn't acting, though it wasn't something to worry so much about, either.

"Don't worry about it. It's in the past now. I'm a part of Iwatobi Elementary now, too."

"That's right. We'll graduate together, right?"

After going as far as saying that, Makoto's smile clouded over a little. His glance facing Rin, looking like he's trying to say something, he hesitates.

"What?"

To Makoto's glance, Rin asks back.

"Yeah, I was concerned a little. You didn't come to yesterday's orientation, did you?"

It's about the middle school orientation. There were explanations about the uniform, textbooks, club activities and so on. However, Rin wasn't there.



Rin looks up at the cherry blossom that doesn't have its flower buds yet. The sunlight piercing through between the branches made him narrow his eyes.

"It's because, I'm not going to middle school here."

Haruka turns his gaze towards Rin. Unable to judge whether it's a joke or he's being serious, he attempted to read the true meaning from Rin's expression. However, just by the sunlight filtering through the trees creating patterns on Rin's face as he's looking up at the cherry blossom's branches or the sky, he couldn't read out anything. Facing the cherry blossom, Haruka decided to wait for Makoto's words. In such cases, what Haruka wants to ask, Makoto asks for him instead.

"What do you mean by that? Why didn't you say anything? We're on the same team. Aren't we friends?"

He didn't ask where he's going and what he's intending to do. Perhaps being on the same team is more important than anything else to Makoto. So, he only reproached him in the question of feelings, namely why he didn't say anything.

It's something Haruka can't say at all. Things like 'team' or 'friends'. Accepting those very easily, Makoto ends up putting it into words. To the point that Haruka becomes embarrassed over what Makoto asks.

"I wasn't keeping it a secret. The destination was decided yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

He can't fathom the conversation at all. Things like 'yesterday' and 'destination'. To begin with, they don't discuss any of the crucial things, like why is he changing schools, why is he attempting to involve Haruka and Makoto, why is he so obsessed with the relay.

Hiding his face slightly that seemed to be made radiant, Rin spoke in a mutter.

"I'm going to Australia."

"By Australia, you mean overseas?"

Makoto asks something stupid. Of course it's overseas. There's no such place in Japan. And then, from the flow of the conversation, it doesn't seem like he's going on a trip.

"I handed in the application for studying abroad to several schools, but yesterday, the receiving side was finally settled."

Makoto was bewildered. With his mouth opened a little like he was attempting to say something, he tenses. Surely, countless words are going back and forth in his head.

"I transferred here after it was decided that I'm going to Australia. I thought I'd tell everyone where I'm going once it had been properly settled. I didn't want to cause trouble for everyone, upsetting them halfway through."

— What a selfish guy.

Haruka grinded his molars, feeling such an anger that he couldn't hold back. He already upset them enough and he keeps causing trouble.

".....Sorry."

Rin muttered in a small voice, perhaps he had guessed Haruka's feelings.

The wind that clearly had the scent of spring in it coils around Haruka. He thought that he wanted to hurry up and swim. He thought that he wanted to hurry up and shake off this sickly sweet wind. Then, he thought that he wanted to hurry up and be released from the ties of this incomprehensible guy.

From the countless words going back and forth in his head, Makoto finally found a short question.

"Why are you going to Australia?"

"To study swimming."

He returned a minimum necessary response to the short question.

As he stood face to face with the cherry blossom, Haruka asked Rin.

"What do you want to do?"

It was a voice that seemed to lose, even to the wind that was and wasn't there.

"I want to become..... an Olympic swimmer."

He can't smile. He can become whatever he wants. But that's not what Haruka wanted to hear. It's always like that. Hiding things about himself, he always says selfish things. And now, too, while saying very self-centered things in front of Haruka—, he stood under the cherry blossom.

Raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, with his eyes widened, Makoto blinked once, like he remembered something.

"When are you going?"

"The day.... after the tournament."

"Then, we don't have any days left of swimming together."

Makoto looks at Haruka. Even while he realizes that he's being watched, he stayed silent, facing the cherry blossom.

—— How does Haru feel? What are his true feelings?

Getting a feeling that that's what Makoto's look is asking, he couldn't directly look at him. Feeling an anger with no outlet, trapping it inside his chest, at last he could suppress the impulse to run away from here. He wants to hurry up and slip his body into the water. The water will release Haruka from the unnecessary ties.

——I want to hurry up and escape into the water.

Haruka's pulse jumped higher. The blood throughout his body flows rapidly. The area around his temples heating up, his palms start to sweat.

——Was I..... running away?

Perhaps he wanted to escape into the water. Seeking to feel at ease, averting his eyes from the real world, perhaps he wanted to escape into the water for the sake of hiding his true feelings.

Without becoming one body or repressing it with force, they were supposed to mutually recognize each other's existence. Feeling sufficiency from that recognition, perhaps he was only depending on it. Perhaps he was swimming for the sake of that.

He wanted to deny it. He strongly wanted to deny it. However, the more he thought about it, the more it heavily weighed down on Haruka as the undeniable truth.

He doesn't know what he should do anymore. The moment he realized that he was depending on the water, his self that should have been standing tall, it seemed like it was about to crumble down. While his two feet become thinner and more brittle, seeming like they'll break, they finally supported Haruka.

—— That can't be!

They're the feet that ran, dove and swam until now. They couldn't be that weak. While thinking that, he couldn't hold back the faint trembling of his feet.

He looks at Makoto. He was still asking Haruka a question.

——What are your true feelings?

Before, Makoto had told Haruka that he's running away from the water. Exposing himself like that, if he were to honestly admit it, perhaps he could feel at ease a little.

The lukewarm spring breeze wraps up Haruka. It didn't have the harshness of winter anymore. Neither blowing through strongly, nor being freezing. There's no need to endure it. He should be honest. That's what it whispered to Haruka.

He won't be tempted by something like that. No matter when and where, he always wants to be himself. He wants to keep being his strong self. Clenching his teeth, he'll stand by himself. He mustn't run away from here. There's no way he could approve of his weak self. He has to keep being strong. To the end, he has to be himself.

Makoto's eyes ask him again.

—— How does Haru feel?

He doesn't answer. He can't answer. Where Rin is going, what he's becoming, is an unrelated matter to him. It can't change the fact that he's standing in front him, on the same team. And, he didn't intend to change his feelings that had decided to swim in the relay, either. So he'll swim. He'll swim it. Under no circumstances will he run away. For the sake of continuing to be his strong self.

".....Fine."

Haruka's voice drifts about, riding the spring-like wind.

"Haru?"

Furrowing his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto anxiously looked at Haruka.

"In the next tournament."

That's all Haruka said, turning his gaze towards Rin. His eyes widening, Rin turns to face Haruka from the front.

"Are you sure? You'll narrow it down to just the relay?"

His voice quickly leaks out from the tip of his mouth. What an endlessly cunning guy. Words that must still compensate should've been necessary. That ending up decoding his heart like it saw through it, Haruka lost the following words. Feeling irritated from Rin

making an expression like he knows everything, he tightly grinds his molars once.

However, he won't run away anymore. That's what he decided. Not from the relay, not from Rin, and not from himself, either—. Therefore, he didn't intend to back out of it now.

"Will you really swim in the relay only?"

Rin pressures the boring idea.

"That's what I intended to say."

While turning back to the cherry blossom, he said so spluttering it out.

Rin's happy expression stopping at the edge of his vision, it irritates Haruka again.

"Alright! Well then, I'll show Haru a sight he's never seen before?"

"A sight he's never seen before.....?"

"Yeah, an extraordinary sight that can't be seen unless it's the four of us!"

Before they knew it, the sun had changed its angle a little. Piercing through the complicatedly twisting branches, a strong light shines on Haruka's face. He doesn't look up the way Rin does, he just narrows his eyes a little.

Makoto stared at Haruka like a child who had gotten lost. He believes to have answered Makoto's question. All he has to do now is think about it on his own. He didn't want to force him or have expectations for him like Rin. Makoto should think about it for himself, find an answer and act according to it. Not because he's thrusting him away or to make him coldhearted. He just thinks that as long as it's what Makoto has decided, it will be the most correct choice.

".....Haru."

Like the dead leaves fluttering about in the wind, Makoto speaks in a helpless voice.

"Could I see it, too? That sight."

It's something he should ask from Rin. What he wants to show, or what he himself wants to see, Haruka himself doesn't know.

"I want to see it, too, Rin. I want to swim with everyone."

While a smile shows on his face, Rin bumps his fist on Makoto's shoulder.

"You called me Rin for the first time. It's all right, if it's us, surely."

Makoto nods, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows.

They heard a small bird's chirping voice coming from somewhere. Perhaps it's that bird, soaring while drawing a trail on the clear sky. As if it's aiming for the goal that's in the endless distance.

"Well then."

While snapping his goggles into place, Rin stood onto the starting block with light steps.

Haruka, Makoto and Nagisa haven't arrived yet. The last class ending in the morning, splitting into two groups to prepare the graduation ceremony and to do the big cleaning from the afternoon, they could go home depending on when they finished the work.

Haruka and Makoto were in the graduation ceremony preparation group, it seemed like it's still taking them some time. As for Nagisa, he probably has afternoon classes as usual.

So, this means that he finally got time to swim alone.

While looking at the clock's hand to match his timing, Rin kicked off from the starting block. Dolphin kick from landing on the water. Then, stroke. It's not butterfly. It's forward crawl.

There's something that has always been bothering him. At the tournaments where he was matched against Haruka, he never once won on 100m. Since Haruka only entered free on the long lane, there were times when he didn't swim with Rin, they generally competed in the two events of 50m and 100m. Sometimes he won on 50m, but no matter what, he couldn't win at 100m.

It was exactly a year ago when he first swam with Haruka. Since he didn't think that he would lose in the city tournament, when he was overtaken, to be honest, he got hasty. From that point on, he was far from catching up no matter how much he swam, he just kept on being separated.

Thanks to the pressure of Haruka's energy gaining on him and the restlessness after being overtaken, when he reached the goal, he had completely exhausted his physical strength. In any case, climbing out of the pool at last, afterwards, he ended up lying down without taking off his goggles.

He lost to Makoto in breaststroke, too, but it wasn't like this. This is a first. That pressure

and restlessness. His swimming was flawless. In fact, he even produced a good time. But even so, he lost. Simultaneously as the question of 'why' ran around in his head, the irritation he felt towards something he couldn't understand swirled in his chest.

—— Damn it. Haa. He's fast. Haa. Who is it?

While stretching out his arms and legs, among his interrupted breathing, that's what he muttered.

Rin's time goes up with each tournament. However, Haruka's went even higher. By the time Rin catches up to the previous time, Haruka advances even more ahead. He always harbored in his chest the feeling that's more than anxiety and restlessness, that he won't be able to catch up for all eternity at this rate. For the sake of freely concentrating on the relay as well, he at least wanted to catch up to Haruka's previous time.

His turn is sharp, small and powerful.

He diligently checks the form and timing. The point that becomes a problem is nowhere to be found. Even so, when he looks at the clock after reaching the goal, of course he was late. He knows that it's not in the difference of physique and muscle strength.

Rather, Rin's faster at the start and turn. Given that, all that's left is the rolling or the 'feet flexibility'.

This was the most troublesome. The ideal 'feet flexibility' can't be defined. A full length rolling from the arm's stroke and to the handling of the back, all of it operating well together is connected to the first ideal 'feet flexibility'. Therefore, no matter how much you think about just your feet, you'll never be able to swim faster, and a precise answer can't possibly exist, either. Trying it out, finding it, getting used to it, making it your thing is the only way. Supposing that Haruka has obtained that ideal 'feet flexibility', if that's the case——, the restlessness wells up again as he thinks about that. Or could Haruka's swimming be the ideal form that Rin is seeking? It's not the current Haruka. It's the Haruka from before.

While thinking about this and that, Rin climbed onto the poolside.

"Well then."

Getting up on the starting block again while snapping his goggles into place, he looked at the clock. Matching the timing, he dives in. It seemed like he could do about thirty more. If his physical strength can hold out, that is.

After practice ended, Gou stood at Iwatobi SC's exit, holding a large paper bag. She's Rin's little sister.

"Gou.....!"

"Ah, Onii-chan."

She turns towards him with a carefree smile. She's a fifth grader, one year below. Turning around to the sound of the automatic door, Haruka and the others were just coming out, too. Noticing Kou, to show his curiosity in his usual fashion, Nagisa goes over to her.

"Hey, who are you? Rin-chan's friend?"

Before Rin answers, Kou gushes out.

"Onii-chan, you're 'Rin-chan' here, too."

"Wh-what are you saying? Actually, why are you here!?"

Without replying to Rin's question, Gou quickly bowed her head towards Haruka and the others.

"I'm Matsuoka Gou. My older brother is always taking care of me."

Haruka turns his eyes towards Makoto. Meaning 'I'll leave the rest to you'.

"Hello. I'm Tachibana Makoto. This is Hazuki Nagisa, this is Nanase Haruka."

Nagisa smiles at her with a 'nice to meet you', Haruka awkwardly nods his head in greeting.

"Ah, I heard. You're swimming in the relay the day after tomorrow, right? I heard about it. He always said 'Nanase's fast, Nanase's fast' after a tournament."

"O-oi, Gou! Mind your own business!"

Embarrassed, he couldn't show his face to Haruka.

"But, I'm glad. That you're swimming together. It was worth it to change his resident's card to Grandma's house and come here. Mom was worried. He suggested changing schools on his own all of a sudden."

"That's enough out of you, shut up!"

Before she could tell any more unnecessary things, when he attempted to quickly drive her away, the meddlesome Makoto asked Gou.

"Did you come here for something?"

"Yeah. I brought this."

He saw a fleeting glimpse of the paper bag's contents that Gou holds out. Realizing that it's a tin of cookies, Rin frets.

"Idiot, you shouldn't have brought that here!"

Rin hid it with his body so that the others wouldn't see.

"But, you're using it here, right?"

"That's true, I asked Mom to take it Grandma's house. I didn't hear about you coming."

"But, Mom told me to bring it since you're using it here anyways—"

"There's no point in bringing it here now, is there? I'll bring it on Sunday."

"But it'll be more baggage—"

"It's fine. More baggage or whatever. In any case, take it back to Grandma's house!"

"Hey, what's that?"

When he turns around, Nagisa was attempting to peek into it, making his big round eyes sparkle.

"It's nothing. It has nothing to do with you!"

He pushes Nagisa back.

"Sunday's the day of the tournament, right? Are you using it for the match?"

Surprisingly, he's sharp when it comes to something like this.

"I'm not using it, it's not related."

"Then, after the match? For the commemoration photographing?"

"Wrong, I said it's not related."

"After the photographing? Ah, I got it!"

"Got wh-what?"

"Is it something to eat? After the tournament, you're holding a 'tried-our-best party'. What could it be? If it's three days before it, rice cookies or cookies maybe?"

He was shocked. He didn't guess right, but he's close.

"Onii-chan, are you holding a 'tried-our-best party'? Can I come, too?"

"I'm not! I mean, either way, you have to go home today."

"I'm with Mom at Grandma's place until Sunday."

"What about school?"

"The graduation ceremony is tomorrow at Sano Elementary, too. Since the fifth graders are only in half of it, I'm taking a break. So Mom and I are going to see the graduation ceremony. The tournament after it, too."

"It's fine. You don't have to come and see."

"There's school on Monday, seeing you off——"

"I'm going home."

Haruka starts running after saying it. After lightly waving his hand to Gou, Makoto started running too.

"Bye."

After waving his hand at Gou, Nagisa runs after them, too.

"See you later."

Turning has back to Gou while feeling relieved, Rin ran after them, too. Joining up with the three of them, when they were about to pass through the fishing harbor, Gou shouted after them in a large voice.

"Onii-chaan, there's 'su-ki-ya-ki' tonight."

Makoto letting out a puff, Nagisa saying 'how nice', they're envious. Casting his eyes down, Rin dropped his speed and took just three steps back.

He didn't want to talk to anyone anymore. Rin was keenly taught the lesson that one's family is so embarrassing.

Haruka was perplexed. He thought that a graduation ceremony was something that would end more quickly. That as they had practiced countless times, they'd advance indifferently, receive their certificates and just digest the ceremony. And yet, he surely didn't expect that the dozens of people crying before his eyes would make him perplexed. Furthermore, the first one to break the dam was Rin. Haruka couldn't understand at all why a guy who's been there for merely two months is crying, what shook his emotions so much. To sympathize with Rin, who's crying with his voice raised, when everyone started crying one by one, Haruka could only look on silently, ending up completely left behind.

It was also surprising that Makoto didn't show any tears among them. Not because he's particularly easily moved to tears, he wasn't the type who couldn't control his feelings either, but despite most of the class crying, he couldn't help feeling that it was unnatural for Makoto to be composed.

The graduation ceremony of tears didn't end even when they returned to the classroom, it went on and on until they bid farewell to the cherry blossom and the flower bed.

Is the wind blowing on Mutsukibashi again today? But it probably doesn't blow with intense coldness anymore. Is Kotsuzumiyama growing taller again? Glowing in the blue sky, while making the lines of the mountain ridge vividly rise to the surface.

While running lined up to Makoto, before he could think about those things, he started sweating before he knew it. Today's temperature was high enough to be mindful of early summer.

In the vicinity of the bridge, he saw Nagisa stepping in place. And then the sound of footsteps getting closer from behind. He knows it's Rin without having to turn around.

Rin never calls out from behind. He always stays silent until he lines up beside them. It seems that he's under the arbitrary impression that Haruka hates being suddenly prodded and treated over-familiarly.

"Hey."

Pausing his breathing, Rin shows a smile. Sending him a fleeting look, Haruka let Rin know just that he hears him.

"Yahhoo."

Nagisa rushed over while waving his hand.

"Hey Haru-chan. Did you cry today?"

The graduation ceremony ended in the morning. That's why they decided to practice at the club in the afternoon. Makoto notified Nagisa.

"I don't cry."

"Really? Even though it's the graduation ceremony?"

Finding Nagisa's way of think that you have to cry just because it's the graduation ceremony to be amusing, his lips come close to relaxing.

"Rin-chan's the one who cried."

"Hold on a sec, it wasn't just me. Most of the class was crying. There's something wrong with Makoto and Haruka for not crying. Also, I told you to stop with 'Rin-chan'. Call me 'leader', Haru."

He thinks that he's a bothersome guy. Crying aloud so much, it's too late for excuses now.

"Sure, leader."

Rin glares at Haruka.

"..... As I thought, when Haru calls me that, it kinda gets on my nerves. Just call me Rin."

They approach the bridge while having a trifling conversation. The wind didn't blow from the mountain, it held the smell of salt water. Riding on that wind, a tern flew in the calm sky.

Nagisa runs getting close to Makoto.

"Hey, Mako-chan didn't cry either?"

"Yeah. Since Rin was crying in a large voice, I was surprised, it ended up kind of breaking the mood."

"Eeh, you really didn't cry? But then, why did Rin-chan cry? He just came here though. Could it possibly be because he's going to Australia?"

Unlike himself, Rin replies while getting embarrassed.

"It's like, I can't handle that kind of mood. Though the time we spent together was short, it was a good class. Hey, why do you know that I'm going to Australia?"

"I heard from Mako-chan yesterday. But, Rin-chan, you're a crybaby, huh?"

When Rin swallowed his breath as he was about to say something, Haruka raised his speed a little.

"I'm gonna leave you behind if you chatter."

The other three raise their pace to match up with Haruka. Before they became aware of it, Nagisa didn't fall behind them. While breathing in a well-regulated rhythm, he keeps up in a light gait. It's not because he suddenly got muscle strength or he grew taller. It's just that he cleared the conditions for the sake of running faster a little. But he probably hasn't noticed it himself.

The tern passes by Haruka and the others, it returns to the sea. Without being taught how to fly, as long as it has the requirements for flying from birth, can it fly with just that? Haruka's thoughts melted into the blue sky, together with the tern.

Makoto let go of his grip at the same time as he strongly kicked the wall. Rapidly stretching up in an instant, the scene immediately changes to underwater. So that the flutter kick gains enough buoyancy, he's aware of the downkick. For the upkick, he lightly kicks upward.

While starting the strokes, he rises to the water's surface. He didn't need a breather, but he inhales a breath with the recovery's timing. If his breathing were to be disordered, it would end up connecting to disturbing his form at once.

He hasn't swum the backstroke in an actual match before. So, even though it was just before the tournament, he didn't feel nervous at all. To what extent he should swim for it to be accepted, to what extent it is now, he didn't know at all. As long as he doesn't know anything, he's not anxious, either. As long as he's not anxious, there's no point in being nervous. He was only feeling exhilarated.

During the graduation ceremony, even though everyone was crying, he didn't cry with them because he couldn't cry. Until the ceremony began, he thought that he would surely end up crying. However, during the ceremony and after it, true feelings didn't gush forth at all.

— It's not over yet.

That feeling restrained the other emotions.

It's not over yet. The best race still awaits. Swimming it with these members, the best race made the last still awaits. He can't possibly cry if it's not even over yet. He can't possibly cry while he has this exhilarated feeling. There's no anxiety, expectation or anything at all. There was only the passion that was enough to get him excited now.

Makoto's hand firmly extending and touching the wall, Nagisa dives in.

Thinking that he passed under too deep, Nagisa rushed to correct his trajectory. One pull and one kick.

His time went up. He feels that it's real, too. He has become capable of grasping the feeling of kicking the mass of the water on the sole of his feet. The resistance's heavy impact is transmitted from the sole of his feet.

But if you were to ask him if he could compete against sixth graders, to be honest, he didn't have the confidence yet. It's the same with the dive. Although there were times when he thought it went well, there are also times when it doesn't, like now. On the other hand of being glad that he can swim with everyone, sometimes he worried if he was becoming a hindrance. Anxiety always standing in front of him, he feels a pain in his chest.

—That's why I want to swim faster.

When those feelings become stronger, his body became lighter without fail. The resistance transmitting through the sole of his feet getting bigger, it rapidly stretches. Simultaneously, the water's propulsive force getting bigger as well, it forces him back like a wall.

While turning his awareness towards the other side of that wall, Nagisa stretched out both his hands so that he could pierce through it.

Rin kicked off from the starting block. He makes the landing on the water at an ideal angle. Spreading his arms wide from the dolphin kick, he starts the butterfly.

In the end, without attaining the 'ideal feet bending' yesterday, he finished practicing the forward crawl. He couldn't overtake Haruka's time. Getting a feeling that he was lacking something fundamental, he ended up giving up on it after swimming twenty laps. He was physically at his limit, too, time wise it was almost time for the other members to arrive, he thought that beyond that, it would be the same no matter how much he swam.

In other words, the fundamental element is the ideal image. It's impossible to become faster without depicting an image and just recklessly aiming only at the time. And Rin's depicted ideal image is Haruka. However, the way Haruka was now, he couldn't possibly become anything like an ideal.

It's been over two weeks since they narrowed practice down to the medley relay. Despite this, the team's results are far from improving. Their time isn't going up at all. No, to say nothing of going up, it dropped. Haruka was the cause. He no longer swam gracefully like before.

If you examine the form in detail, the point that's becoming a problem is nowhere to be found, but in his stroke and kick, it wasn't functioning at all as a propulsive force. While carving a clumsy rhythm, he just kept swimming.

Rin didn't attempt to say anything about it. Rather, there was no point in giving advice. Like a water bird spreading its wings and gliding in the sky, he swims without even feeling water's resistance. Such as that way of swimming was largely out of Rin's area of expertise.

Now, Haruka struggled in the water like a different person. Brushing away the water coiling around him, he attempts to go ahead by force. Differing from Makoto's powerfulness, he just recklessly aimed at the goal. Rejecting the water, it even seemed like he hates it. Does it have a purpose, or is he injured, or did he really end up forgetting how to swim? In any case, it became a way of swimming that didn't bear the slightest resemblance to what Haruka's was until now.

Now that he lost sight of the ideal image, Rin didn't even know what he should be struggling towards anymore. So long as Haruka is in his current state, he can't pursue the ideal. While that may be true, he didn't intend to ask Haruka why that is, either. It wouldn't change anything even if he asked, even if nothing can be done about it at this rate, he thought that he doesn't mind. There's no change in his feelings that decided to swim on the same team.

However, Haruka will one day surely break out of this situation. He doesn't know when this will happen. Will he make it in time for the tournament, or will it be way ahead..... In any case, he'll certainly break out, he will become faster without a doubt. Unless he becomes faster, there's no meaning in having suffered and worried.

But when Rin wonders if Haruka will go ahead of him again like this, he becomes unable to stand it after all. Even when he thinks that he's gotten closer, he ends up being

separated again. No matter how much time passes, he won't reach him. No matter how much time passes, he'll keep swimming in front of him.

— Why is it always him.....

Clenching his teeth, he finished swimming the 100m while strongly striking the water.

Haruka leaps in. The moment he leapt, he thought that it's no good. Landing on the water. Then, he starts doing the strokes, unable to catch the rhythm. Strength fills his body. He becomes stiff. Even though he knows that he can't swim properly in that case, it was already hopeless. He couldn't swim any other way anymore.

Telling himself that he can't do anything about it now, he forcibly convinces himself. Lets himself give up. Lets himself compromise.

He lies to himself, saying that it's fine like this now. Deceives himself. Keeps fooling himself.

While tormenting himself with a helpless feeling of restlessness and self-hatred, Haruka still kept swimming.

Until just about two weeks before, he didn't even care about his time. And then, after he began caring about his time, the water ended up being nothing but water to Haruka. Physically existing, becoming a target of buoyancy to obtain, it turned into nothing more than an obstacle that became a hindrance of propulsion. Then, doing a rolling according to the textbook, he repeats the strokes. It's a basic swimming against the water as a substance. The connection between Haruka and the water turned into something no more than that.

Touching the goal as the fourth swimmer, Haruka confirms the time as he lifts his face from the water's surface. The mediocre number that's no different from usual lined up mechanically. A small sound leaks out from the gap between his molars as he lightly grits his teeth.

Aki extended her hand to Haruka, who had taken off his goggles.

"Good job."

Wondering if she's imitating Makoto's tone of voice, he speaks in a voice like his throat was crushed a little.

"Thanks."

Holding on to Aki's hand, he climbed up onto the poolside. The size and pulling strength of the grasping hand was different from Makoto's. Taking off his cap and shaking his head, he asked while making the water come out of his ears.

"How's your team doing?"

"Yeah, our time is smoothly going up."

"I see, you're trying your best."

He wasn't very interested, but it felt awkward to wave her hand away without saying anything. That's all it is. While that may be true, he doesn't intend to give a report about themselves, like social rules dictate.

"It feels kind of weird to meet again after graduating, doesn't it?"

Aki shows a carefree smile.

"Come April, most of us all will be in the same middle school."

"Yeah, that's true. But crying so much and saying goodbye, it's kind of embarrassing a little to meet again so easily."

He thinks it's typical of Aki. To Haruka, the graduation ceremony was just a ceremony, it didn't have any other special meaning. If there's something that largely differs between Haruka and Aki, it's probably the way they hold their awareness for their friends. It's not just Aki. Haruka was different from everyone else. Showing that at the time of the graduation ceremony, to the point of saying that it's unpleasant, he ended up being perplexed.

"That's because it was a good class."

Unable to bring himself to let go of Aki's hand, he tries imitating Rin's words.

"Yeah. It really was a good class. We can't laugh and cry with those members anymore, can we?"

The 'member' keyword rolls around in Haruka's ears. It doesn't pass through easily like other words.

"That's right."

He thought of ending the conversation with those short words. He looks at Rin taking a break on the bench in a fleeting glance. He was talking to Makoto about something. It

doesn't seem like they're resuming practice yet. As a last resort, Haruka attempted to change the direction his body was facing, intending to say so himself.

"Nanase-kun."

When he slightly moved the toes of his right foot, Aki called Haruka to halt. When he turned his gaze towards her, Aki looked embarrassed.

"Saying to Nanase-kun that it would be better if he swam in the relay, that is, um, I'm sorry."

Saying that, she slowly bowed her head. What could she be apologizing for? Though he stared at Aki bowing her head, he couldn't find the answer.

"Why?"

He had no choice but to ask that. Or, would it have been better if he had pretended to know and said 'it doesn't matter'?

Aki raises her head.

"You see, I mistakenly believed without consideration that Nanase-kun needed friends to mutually rely and be relied on, to cry and laugh with. I always thought that friends are that sort of thing. But I realized that it was just my selfish assumption. Nanase-kun has his own feelings, teams and friends come in many shapes, right? Really, it feels like unnecessary meddling. Nanase-kun and the others, all of you are so serious, all of you looking straight ahead at swimming, seeing Nanase-kun and the others like that, it made me feel a little ashamed..... Aah, why did I say something like that? You didn't understand any of that, huh..... But you see, I think it's the same. Our feelings and Nanase-kun and the others' feelings, I want to think that they're the same. Along with everyone on the team, there's difficulty and pain facing the same objective, having to overcome that sort of thing, there's impatience and something like worry, too..... So you see, when I see Nanase-kun and the others putting in all their effort, I feel the strength welling up that I have to try my best, too. Really, it always encourages me."

Aki softly drops her gaze on the pool.

Haruka wondered if it would be better if he said something, but without knowing what he should say, he could only fixedly stare at Aki casting her eyes down. Aki's words fly past each other in his head like fragments. None of them pass easily through his ears. And he couldn't easily accept any of them.

He doesn't understand what sort of meaning there is to the relay. He doesn't know yet

what waits ahead of it, either. It's because he didn't know that he agreed to become a member. And now, he's swimming. That's all it was. It's not that he's swimming particularly for the sake of encouraging someone.

How did Aki interpret Haruka's silence? With her gaze still turned towards the pool, a faint smile rose to the surface. Her mouth opens a little.

"You see, swimming is really fun for me now."

Raising her gaze, Aki peeks at Haruka's eyes. Like she's trying to search for the true Haruka in the depths of his eyes.

—How does Nanase-kun feel?

Aki throws the same thing at him as Makoto asked under the cherry blossom at that time. As he tried replying that he doesn't really know, the words got stuck inside his throat. And then, meaningless words rush out of his mouth instead.

"I see, let's both try our best."

"Yeah."

Lightly raising his hand, he turned his back towards Aki. Aki's smile disappearing from his field of vision, only the word 'fun' remained in his ear. Swimming and having thought that it's 'fun' — it has probably never happened before. Could that be waiting for him beyond the relay?

He walks to the bench where Rin and the others are sitting. He wondered how much they had swam today when he saw Nagisa breathing into his back. How is it for Nagisa? Like Aki, is he having fun swimming? How is it for Rin? For Makoto.....?

Because the sun had gone down a little, the light shining in from the skylight windows makes rectangular sunny spots in the pool. While looking at the light diffusedly reflecting on the ripples, Haruka vaguely remembered that tomorrow is the day of the tournament.

Chapter Seven: Relay

It was a very sunny day since morning. While Haruka looked up at the blue sky, he wondered how many times it's been that he's come here. The Hiyori Swimming Stadium was an especially big venue even in the prefecture, the sports meets were usually held here. When you come to this venue, it feels like it's always sunny. He thought that it was better that it was sunny, even though it didn't really matter if it was sunny or not because of the indoor pool.

"The weather's nice again today, huh?"

As usual, Makoto's voice is cheerful. On a sunny day, he especially thinks so.

"Wow, it's huge."

Having come here for the first time, Nagisa looks up at it, round-eyed with amazement.

And then, Rin is extremely taciturn. Could he be nervous? Though it's not in his character.

When Rin writes down the four names at the reception desk, the person in charge took out the girls' list and started comparing it. He wondered if Rin will say something, but he just silently watched them do the work. Since the person in charge searched until the end of the list but the names weren't there, doubtfully raising their head, they start to say something. But seeing Rin and the other's faces and showing an attitude of understanding, they began to look for the boys' list.

While walking in the corridor leading to the locker room, Nagisa burst into laughter that he was suppressing at once.

"Hey, did you see? The person just now, he ended up taking out the girls' list. I wonder which name he thought was a girl's? It has to be Rin-chan."

"Wrong. It's everyone's."

"By everyone, you mean me too?"

"Yes. You too."

"Eeh. But I don't know any girl named 'Nagisa'. I saw a Rinrin at the zoo before, though. It was female."

Haruka somehow managed to hold back, but Makoto doubled over in laughter. While looking at Makoto in a sidelong glance, Rin speaks, seeming displeased.

"If you let your mind wander, you'll end up losing. Pull yourselves together a little."

"Yeees."

Do they understand or not? For now, it felt like in Nagisa's response that at least Rin's nervousness was conveyed.

As they enter the changing rooms, they heard the sound of lockers opening and shutting coming from here and there. A considerable amount of people are already gathered. As Rin opens a locker within reach, the other three also opened doors, searching for an empty locker nearby.

"Rin."

When he turns around after his name is called, some people heading on their way to the pool were looking at Rin. Rin's cheeks unintentionally soften. They're members of Sano SC, that he belonged to before.

"Hey, it's been a while."

When he responds lightly waving his hand, one of them approached with a friendly smile. It's Yamazaki Sousuke. He's tall and thin as ever.

"You look like you're doing well."

"Well yeah. What about you?"

"Same as usual, I guess. That aside, did you get to meet your father?"

Being asked that question, Rin is bewildered.

"Aah, well."

While being aware of Haruka and the others, he gave a vague answer.

"I see. See you later, then."

Seeming to have guessed the circumstances based on Rin's state, Sousuke left the locker room, quickly cutting short the conversation. Then, only a strange silence remained.

Without anyone chatting about anything, they changed their clothes in silence. Having finished changing first, Nagisa makes a snapping sound with the goggles' rubber,

imitating Rin.

"I'm first."

Like always, as he says it in a carefree voice, the stagnant air ended up disappearing, like fog clearing up.

"Then, I'm second."

Makoto says while closing the locker, looking at each other with Nagisa, they laughed.

Nagisa asked Rin.

"Hey, how many rounds are we swimming today?"

"One round."

"Then, tomorrow?"

"It's only the case if we place within the top 16 overall of today's race, but then we swim in the semifinal, and if we place in the top 8 overall, then we're in the finals."

"Then, we have to win three times, right?"

"That's right. Well, for now, it'll be fine if we aim for no less than 4th within the group today."

After saying it, he thinks that it was a weak-spirited remark. It's possible that somewhere in his heart, it's bothering him after all that the team's condition hasn't improved. He looks at Haruka. With his back turned towards Rin, he was attempting to close the locker's door. Haruka had to have heard it, too. Did Haruka also think that Rin is weak-spirited? And did he think that he was the cause of making Rin weak-spirited?

He wanted to tell him to not mind it, but without knowing how he should say it, Rin just intently stared at Haruka's back.

At the pool, they held each contest by order of age. In every contest, the girls' race is before the boys'. And now, the girls' medley relay was being held among great cheers.

As the anchor, Aki stands on top of the starting block. In the preliminaries, each race becoming a close contest succeeding a close contest, Aki and the others' race also unfolded a fierce development that takes your breath away.

Simultaneously as Aki's feet kicks off from the starting block, the swimmer beside her also made the start. Landing on the water. And then, their heads simultaneously rise. Just like if they were doing synchronized swimming, the arms and legs of the forward crawl are matched. Then, just from right behind them, there was another swimmer gaining on them with tremendous force. It seemed like they were about to catch up just before the goal, but somehow getting away, she was able to pass through the preliminaries by arriving at almost the same time in second place. If there were 5m more, she would have certainly been overtaken. When she thinks that, chills ran down Aki's spine.

Aki and the other three started heading towards the locker room, without any of them chattering. In the passageway, they pass by the line of boys heading towards the starting positions.

"Congratulations, Zaki-chan."

Makoto held up the palm of his hand.

"Thanks. Good luck to you too, Tachibana-kun."

Aki passes by while hitting Makoto's hand and making a small snappy sound.

They came in second, but they couldn't slack off at all. The other three aren't smiling, either. Even though they practiced so much and raised their time, they weren't able to demonstrate its results enough. Those feelings weighed heavily on the four of them. Perhaps they were nervous? Perhaps they ended up straining themselves? Perhaps their form collapsed? Without knowing the cause, they grow anxious. If things go the same way they did today, they'll definitely end up being eliminated from the competition. When they think of that, they became hopelessly anxious.

However, no matter how anxious they become, even if they don't know the cause, there was only one thing to do tomorrow. It's a matter of swimming as they had practiced. And, if they can do that, it's a matter of believing that they'll certainly win. Taking a deep breath, Aki spoke in a voice as cheerful as possible.

"Good job, everyone. Let's try our best tomorrow, too."

The team got their smiles back from Aki's words.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Yeah yeah, it's tomorrow, right?"

"All right, we'll win the championship tomorrow!"

"We can absolutely do it. We've practiced so much. Let's try our best."

With everyone's smiles, a true smile returned to Aki's heart. Either bravado or pretending to be tough, anything is fine. If someone on the team has a cheerful mood, everyone cheers up. And then, everyone's cheer gives them their true smile. That's what a team is. That's the strength of a team. If they have that strength, even if they don't win tomorrow, even if they end up crying, perhaps they can think that they're glad to have been on this team. As unwavering confidence, that much was in Aki and the others' hearts.

While feeling a new energy rising, Aki began to walk, heading towards tomorrow.

While lightly loosening his body in front of the starting block, confirming that Makoto and Nagisa are in front of him, Rin felt it on his back that Haruka was behind him. He didn't especially have a reason to call out, but he wanted to be strongly conscious of the fact that he'll be swimming with these members from now.

Held on the short lane, they swim a total of 400m, one person 100m at a time. The first swimmer is Makoto, the second is Nagisa, the third is Rin, and then the anchor is Haruka. Called by the club name starting from the first lane, the first swimmer of the called team raises their hand and stands beside the starting block. Since the first swimmer is doing the backstroke, it becomes an underwater start.

After four short whistles were blown, Makoto enters the water on the long whistle. Holding his grip on the next long whistle, he pushes the sole of his feet against the wall.

"Take your marks!"

He pulls his body forward with a forceful push. A moment of silence. And then, a short buzzer sound—.

He leapt backward all at once. After landing on the water, he starts up his feet from a posture extending to kick. While breaking into the strokes, he rises to the water's surface. Makoto's head came up as first ahead. His figure that raises big splashes with powerful strokes, gives the impression of a marine creature.

Rin felt something that was different from before in Makoto's swimming. Not just in the crawl or the backstroke, he thinks that a fundamental part of his swimming is changing. Brushing aside the water, the forcefully advancing style hasn't changed, but the reckless way of going with all his strength was missing. In some way, perhaps it can even be called a powerful dreadfulness, while carrying a massive feeling like an orca or a whale

because of it, he looked like he was swimming at ease. And, he has unmistakably gotten faster. Makoto might be attempting to evolve into a creature of the sea. While thinking about that, Rin stared at Makoto's swimming.

In top position, when Makoto touches the wall, Nagisa's both feet leapt off from the starting block. His leap is too high. Sinking as deep as much as he had leapt high, it ends up taking time to rise to the surface. In breaststroke, when your posture ends up breaking at the start, it becomes difficult to make a fine adjustment. The permitted movements underwater after the dive are just the one pull and one kick. After finally rising to the surface, Nagisa dropped their rank to second place. There's half a body difference with Sano SC.

— Don't mind it, Nagisa. It's always like that. Your special ability is catching up in the second half.

While muttering in his mind, Rin stood at the starting block.

Sousuke stands beside Rin. During the time he was at Sano SC, their relation was having competed for being the representative, formerly they certainly had a relationship that could be called friends. When he said that he wanted to go Australia and when he said that he wanted to swim at Iwatobi SC, just saying 'I understand' while he was half shocked, he didn't try anything like half-heartedly keeping him back or pressing questions. Sousuke kept being someone who understood Rin well until the end. 'See you later.' 'Yeah.' That was their last conversation.

And now, Sousuke is standing in the line beside him as an arch-enemy.

"Sorry about earlier."

Sousuke says to Rin, his gaze facing ahead. He's directly apologizing for having made imprudent conversation.

"It doesn't matter."

Rin gives a short reply. He's saying that it's not a big deal. By merely exchanging only that much of a conversation, the two of them could return to the way they were several months before. And, they were able to mutually recognize that they're opponents who absolutely won't lose.

Rin takes up a crouching start posture. He's been testing this style since a month ago. It doesn't particularly raise his time, he couldn't prove that it's theoretically advantageous, either. In the process of searching for his own form, it's nothing more than one

experiment that he ran into during his exploring for a solution. But, he felt the possibility. That is his entire reason.

In the end, without being able to shorten the difference, Nagisa touched the surface of the wall in 2nd place.

Sousuke making the start, Rin's foot leaps. The start isn't a contest of just kicking power. The real contest is how much they utilize that power as propulsion power. While being aware of the angle of landing on the water and the underwater posture, Rin raised splashes on the water's surface.

Sousuke goes a little in front of Rin. While doing dolphin kicks, he lines up to Sousuke. He has perfectly left behind the other swimmers. From here, it becomes a contest just between two of them, against Sousuke. While rising to the surface, he starts the butterfly's stroke. At this point in time, Rin is in the lead by a little.

However, Sousuke demonstrates his specialty from here. If their difference were to widen like this, Rin wouldn't approve of him as an arch-enemy. Though his physique is lanky, making use of his long reach and bigger than average palm to the maximum, he forcefully chases after Rin.

The turn is almost simultaneous. Rin comes up ahead again. And then, Sousuke gains on him.

— Being hasty is no good. I mustn't put strength into my shoulders. I have to transmit my entire body's flexibility to my feet.

While being conscious of the image of swimming with his thighs, he flexibly cleaves through the water.

On the verge of being lined up to with just a little remaining, barely getting away, Rin was able to connect to Haruka.

Haruka dives in over Rin's head. Both the angle and the water landing point are not bad. But.....

Right after landing on the water, the difference began to widen.

Rin wondered if time had stopped only for Haruka. His body isn't advancing forward. On the other hand of the difference widening between the top, he ended up being lined up to by the third place swimmer. Right after Haruka's legs and feet still aren't moving, he wondered if he'll end up drowning. Just like on that day, when he attempted to pick up Aki's scarf.....

After the turn, retreating until third place, in the end the fourth place swimmer also began to line up to him, but even so, Haruka just repeated the fundamental movements.

It was after he retreated to fourth place that Haruka's hand reached the goal at last. His breathing is so rough, while his shoulders largely heave up and down, that you wouldn't even think that he only swam just 100m.

Without grabbing onto Makoto's held out hand, when he climbs up onto the poolside, tearing off his goggles and cap, he started walking towards the locker room. He passed by Aki on the way, but he wouldn't even look at her. Everyone silently sees Haruka off. Nobody knew what words to say to the current Haruka. There was nothing better than silently seeing him off.

Soon, Haruka's figure disappeared into the locker room.

When the morning sun finally began to rise from the edge of Myoujinyama, Rin was in front of a grave. The cold air that contained the tide flows so it grazes his cheek. The waves breaking onto the steep cliff, the peaceful sound rose and broke. On the sky that began to turn white, wispy purple clouds trailing, it created many patterns that looked like stripes drawn in pastel crayons.

The grave was firmly sitting faced towards the sea. To Rin, its dignified shape, without a single time to regret, seemed like it was sticking its chest out. While making him feel something that had the appearance of a profound dignity, it calmly overlooks the sea.

Rin was standing in front of that grave. He was facing the grave the whole time from when it was still dark out. The sky that is regaining its brightness makes the lines of Myoujinyama's ridge rise to the surface.

"It ends with today. I came to say goodbye. I, decided to try and pursue the dream. I don't know how far I can go, but I'm thinking of going as far as I can. So, I can't come here for a while. Please forgive me, okay? But, I'm glad that I came here after all. I'm glad I met those guys. Because it gave me the motivation to seriously pursue the dream..... No matter where I go, I absolutely won't forget. Just them, I absolutely won't. I.... I want to win just today. Just today, I want to do the best swimming. I want to become a real team with those guys. So, today, I'll tell them properly. Everything, all of it as it is..... So, please look out for me, okay?"

Making a fist, he lightly bumps the gravestone. A cool sensation passed to him.

"Pops."

The wind blowing from the sea coils around Rin, then disappears.

“.....Pops.”

He murmurs again.

Could the tide be rising? The sound of the waves hitting the rock broke, while drowning out the cries of the sea gulls. Looking up as he feels a strong light, the sun that had shown its face from Myoujinyama began to shine on the earth and sea without distinguishing between them.

Taking a deep breath from the air that contained tide, Rin filled up his chest with it. Then, he turns back to the grave.

“Well then, I’ll be on my way.”

Showing a gentle smile, Rin began to run towards the place of the deciding battle.

“Hey hey, what place should we get in the semifinal?”

While changing their clothes in the locker room, Nagisa asked Makoto in his usual manner.

“We can go to the finals if we’re within the top 8 overall.”

Makoto replied while adjusting the length of his goggles.

“First place. If you say something easy-going as eighth, we’ll end up losing!”

While putting emphasis on the end of the word, when Rin claps Nagisa on the back, a nice dry sound resounded across the locker room.

“That hurt! What’re you doing, Rin-chan?”

From the other side of the locker, suddenly laughter breaking out, Sousuke peeks at them.

“What, Rin. You’re called Rin-chan over there, too?”

Saying that, he laughed again. Being laughed at, Rin hastily denies it.

“N-no, that’s wrong. It’s just this guy. Everyone calls me leader here.”

This time, Makoto speaks while doubling over in laughter.

"Is that so? Rinrin."

Laughter rose from the other side of the locker again. Rin turns around to face Makoto.

"Makoto. You, be a little more tactful."

When Rin says that, laughter broke out again. Makoto and Nagisa were both laughing.

Even Rin, who was supposed to be angry, his cheeks soften as he's infected by it.

However, looking at Haruka sitting on the bench, such a merry mood ended up being blown off to somewhere.

Haruka was staring at some distant point, alone and quietly. They haven't heard Haruka say a single word since morning. Nobody could talk to Haruka. Without displaying a single thing resembling emotion, he was just expressionlessly staring into the distance. If it weren't for what happened yesterday, perhaps they could've thought of it as the usual Haruka. The Haruka who always lives up to the expectations if you rely on him. But.....

Inside Rin, something begins to burn.

—We're a team, Haru. Believe, in us!

He's not swimming alone. Those feelings are running about all throughout his body.

Closing the door of the locker, Rin snapped the rubber of his goggles.

"All right, let's go!"

Aki touched the goal in first place. She worries more about the time than the placing. When she turns around to look at the clock, it was indicating a good time, the kind that they didn't easily get even in practice.

"All right!"

In the water, Aki tightly grasped her fist a little. It was completely different from yesterday. Her body moved just like she had practiced. She was able to swim with her feelings packed into it more than during practice.

—It's going well. At this rate, we can absolutely compete for the top even in the finals!

She was able to firmly believe in that.

When she's pulled up by Yuuki's hand, everyone welcomed her with a smile.

"You did it, Zaki."

"Yeah, the finals are next."

"We got a good time, huh?"

"Really, it'll absolutely go well with that."

The four of their expressions were completely different from yesterday, too. Everyone realized that the team's mood had risen.

Remaining like that near the poolside's entranceway, Aki and the others decided to root for the boys. The girls' second race finishing, Sano SC reached the goal in top in the boys' first race. It's the swimming club that Rin was in.

The boys' second group heading towards the starting position pass by in front of Aki. Makoto's smile was among them.

"Congrats, Zaki-chan. Good luck in the next one, too."

"Yeah, thanks. Good luck to you, too, Tachibana-kun."

Makoto's raised hand overlapping with Aki's hand, he passes by, making a snapping sound.

While heading towards the starting position, Makoto moved his gaze to the pool with small waves rising on it.

His fear of the water hasn't disappeared yet. The feeling that there's a monster lurking in there is still inside his mind. The feeling that he might end up being sucked into, entangled and dragged in was still clinging to him.

Supposing that if this was an individual contest, perhaps his foot would've been cramping up even now and in this place. Without advancing a single step forward, perhaps he would've been standing still. However, he has friends now. He has a team that he swam together with. If he were to say that they help each other or support each other, perhaps Haruka would get angry at him. But Makoto certainly felt supported right now. Perhaps he's not helping anyone, perhaps he doesn't even have the strength for it. However, it was a fact with no falseness to it that he was being supported. Makoto was standing here, being supported by his friends.

The feeling of wanting to win comes welling up, strongly and intensely, unlike before. His chest, his back, his arms, his feet, then the depths of his body are heating up. It's not for the sake of someone, for the sake of something, much less for the sake of himself. Making an effort and worrying with everyone, they struggled for the sake of winning. So that's why he feels that he wants to win. In just this feeling, he won't lose to anyone. He won't surrender to anyone.

".....Haru."

Murmuring it so quietly that no one else can hear, he looks at Haru. Then, tightly squeezing his right fist, Makoto stepped his foot into the water's edge.

"Hey, Haru-chan."

Nagisa talked to him at the time that the race was about to start. He hasn't spoken to anyone yet today. No one could come in contact with Haruka. However, Nagisa nonchalantly jumped over his defenses. To the point that it suddenly made him think that what he was obsessing over is a trivial matter, all too soon and easily.

"What should I do? I'm starting to feel nervous."

Nagisa says without even showing such behavior. Haruka raised the corner of his mouth a little.

"You are? What a joke."

"It's true. C'mon look, my palms are drenched with sweat. Even my feet are shaking."

Saying that, he shows his knees shaking. Unable to estimate how much of it he's doing sincerely, when he lightly pokes his head, Nagisa stopping the movements of his knees, he embarrassedly cast his eyes down.

"Sorry, I lied about my feet. But I really am nervous. I ended up failing the start yesterday, so I keep thinking about what'll I do if I end up failing again today. And so, if we don't win, it'll end up being my fault after all, won't it?"

What Nagisa was saying, was something extremely simple. Finding the honest feelings inside himself that aren't embellished with anything, he puts it into words. If it's childish or pure, in any case, it was something that Haruka couldn't imitate.

"Don't think about boring things."

"It's not boring. It's something very important."

That may be so for Nagisa, but thinking it to be a boring thing after all, Haruka took a little breath.

"Then, if someone overtakes you, do you think it's their fault that you lost?"

"Eeh, I don't think so. Such a thing." [this sounds extra awkward but I wanted to keep Nagisa's fragmented way of saying it]

Instead of saying something, Haruka stared into Nagisa's eyes. Haruka and Nagisa mutually peek into the depths of each other's eyes. Because of that, Nagisa finally realized that there's a contradiction in what he's saying.

"Ah, I see. But I'll still end up feeling responsible for it."

"As much as feeling responsible, say that sort of thing after you've gotten faster."

"Ah, I see. Huh? Somehow, I'm suddenly at ease. My nervousness ended up disappearing after talking to Haru-chan."

Haruka raised the corner of his mouth again, while thinking that he's a weird guy, whether it is from simplicity or something else.

The first swimmer is Makoto, the second is Nagisa, the third is Rin, the anchor is Haruka. Naturally, it's the same order as yesterday, but he didn't intend to make the same result.

Beating the top time in the previous race, it's certain that Sano SC advances to the finals. While letting the feeling of swimming against Sousuke again burn his chest, Rin was looking at Makoto waiting for the starting signal.

After four short whistles, submerging on the long whistle. On the next long whistle, seizing the grip.

"Take your marks!"

--Silence--

Simultaneously with the short buzzer sound, all the swimmers leap all at once. When their heads came up, Makoto stood at the top. He keeps a beautiful streamline.

In any swimming style, being conscious of the streamline is an important matter, but it's especially difficult for the backstroke. The cause of it was in the complicatedness of the S-shaped pull. Submerging the hand from the top of the head, since it has to rotate deeply, it isn't stable if the shoulders are stiff. If the rolling's inclination is made big for the sake of compensating for that, the body ends up sinking next time and speed decreases. In the state of having balanced the streamline, to perform the highly efficient S-shaped pull, the softness of the shoulders is essential.

In Makoto's case, the softness of his shoulders was of first-class quality. He's capable of bringing forward the hand that was in the back over his head.

Reversing at the turn, he kicks the wall. Then, when he commences the strokes, rapidly stretching again, he separates from the other swimmers.

Rin thought that Makoto is suited for the backstroke. It's true for the softness of his shoulders, but his back is also strong. The backstroke isn't "swimming on your back", it's a matter of "swimming with your back". The strength of the back balancing the rolling, it draws a beautiful S-shaped pull.

Simultaneously with the push, you stretch your hand that's on the entry side. Making use of the force attempting to return from the reaction of having stretched, you catch the water. There's no futility at all in the sequence of motions. Because the strength of the back is balancing the rolling.

Repeating the powerful strokes while raising splashes, Makoto touched the wall as he kept top position.

Nagisa leaps. His timing was late by a little. Also, it's the usual clumsy dive. One pull, one kick. Even so, he somehow manages to rise to the surface as he keeps top position.

Compared to other swimming styles, there was a reason why Nagisa's specialty was the breaststroke. His ankles are soft. When you hold down his toes by hand, it ends up connecting to his shin. In other words, right behind it, that was also capable of kicking the water with the entirety of the sole of his foot.

But, even among the four swimming styles, since the breaststroke uses up the most physical strength, Nagisa always ends up stalling once, before the 50m point. Even now he's being overtaken by one person, he ended up being overtaken immediately following the turn. Perhaps Nagisa is repeatedly saying 'I got overtaken' in his head. When that turned into 'I'll overtake them in return', he plays his trump card.

Upkick—. By pulling his foot back while moving his dolphin kick upward, he not only

decreases the water's resistance, but that movement itself also becomes propulsive power. This is not something that you can do after being taught. If you don't have that something like an innate sense, it wasn't a way of swimming that everyone can do. For this reason, for Nagisa, who's the type who remembers with his body, perhaps it's fitting. Or, does that butterfly practice bear its fruits? If that is the case, it's something that was outside of being taught.

However, that wasn't the only reason for Nagisa's acceleration. There's something else that can't be explained with words. Something else that isn't understood unless someone is swimming lined up to him. Putting it one way, it's something like spirit, but it also differs from that. That noisy sensation.....

Rapidly stretching, when he lines up to the second place swimmer, that swimmer's balance breaks and he retreats. From there, stretching again, there's a little difference with first place as he makes the touch.

Rin shoots out from a crouching start. He thought that his body is light while diving. It felt like he could fly anywhere.

— I'm not landing on the water!

He's still in the air. Though his senses are steadily going forward, time isn't keeping up. Both the world around him and his own body, everything seemed to have stopped. Bewildered at the unbalance between time and senses, the bewilderment was expressed by becoming a tremor of his body. Already late when he thought that he's done for, Rin failed at the landing on the water.

Largely dropping their rank, he retreats to fifth place. Rin, whose best feature is the dash power, ended up failing at the start. There is no reason to be patient. The time to spare on calming down and thinking about something ended up being blown off to somewhere. He can't be composed anymore. With the exception of recklessly pushing on, he couldn't think of anything else any more.

The race's pace wasn't that fast. If it was the usual Rin, even if he bears the start's failure in mind, he was supposed to be able to sufficiently compete for the top. However, until making the 50m turn, he wasn't capable of regaining himself.

He somehow managed to gain on, but he was barely in fourth place when he made the touch. He didn't even have the leisure to see off Haruka diving in overhead.

All of a sudden, feeling a light, he turns around. Haruka was swimming. Haruka was swimming while emitting light. The powerful energy becoming light, it was dazzlingly

emitted from Haruka.

Rin couldn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off of him. Spreading his wings like a water bird dancing in the skies, Rin's heart was snatched away by Haruka, swimming as if he was gliding.

It was after Haruka had made the 50m turn that Rin somehow climbed up onto the poolside, pulled by Makoto's hand. Bearing an overwhelming difference, Haruka's head rises to the surface. He commences the strokes from there. A catch that seems to embrace closely. A kick that bends softly with elegance. A rolling that seems to flow. Then, from that peaceful form, a high speed that can't even be imagined.

The sight that transcended reality fascinated and didn't let go of not only Rin, but everyone watching. No, they're not watching. They're feeling it. No one here could have possibly kept from feeling the heatedly throbbing beat.

Haruka touched the goal. Without looking at the time, he lightly climbs up onto the poolside. In a manner so light that you would almost end up forgetting that he was in a race.

Even after having finished swimming, the energy that wouldn't cool down yet kept peacefully emitting from Haruka's body. Pressed down by that energy, no one was able to get close to him. They can't move.

Haruka got faster again. And yet, not even regret is welling up. He could only be exposed to Haruka's emitting energy.

Rin looks at his hand. It was trembling slightly. It's not just Rin. Makoto's back was also trembling. Nagisa's feet were also trembling so much that he couldn't walk.

Walking up to Nagisa, Haruka puts his right hand on his shoulder. At that moment, Nagisa's eyes were flooding with tears. Cries flooded from Nagisa's mouth. While hugging Haruka, he cried, raising a large voice. Unafraind of what the other people around may think, he sobbed, clinging to Haruka.



Haruka put his hand on Nagisa's head, without being surprised or bewildered.

"Next are, the finals."

"Yeah, Haru-chan. Haru-chan!"

After he looked up at Haruka's face, Nagisa cried on Haruka's chest again.

In the locker room, voices of delight and voices of consolation were mingled together in a mess. And, the thread of nervousness being stretched around inside it. The finals are held after this in every contest. Both the free that Haruka was supposed to swim in and the breaststroke that Makoto was supposed to swim in. And also the medley relay that the four of them are swimming in.

Haruka and the others all sat on the bench in silence. With a little reddish tinge remaining in his eyes, the irregularity of his breathing gone, Nagisa had completely regained his composure. While lightly rotating his shoulders, Makoto was boosting his concentration for facing the finals. Haruka was just expressionlessly staring at a spot. If it were to be compared, with a gaze that seemed to be staring at the future.

And Rin was still hesitating.

Even though he was supposed to have decided to face them seriously, no matter what, he couldn't take one more step forward. Even though it might put him at ease if he told them everything.....

No, he's not telling them for the sake of being eased. He's telling them for the sake of becoming a true team. He can't do the best swimming as long as he's hiding his own feelings. It can't be possible. Even though he understands that, his still hesitant self was helplessly chagrined.

"Matsuoka."

His name suddenly called, he looks at Haruka. Haruka's gaze was still facing towards a distant place somewhere else.

"Earlier, what happened?"

It wasn't a blaming tone. He's asking because he really doesn't know. That's what it felt like.

— Because you swam like that yesterday.....

He stopped thinking about considering it that far. No matter how many excuses you make, nothing will start. Could he have been nervous? That is also possible. Rather, he might've put in too much fighting spirit. Thinking too much that he has to do it, his spirits rising higher than necessary, he lost his calm judgment. But there's nothing to do about it, understanding it by this time.

"Sorry."

He honestly apologized. Those were the only words he could find.

Haruka turns his gaze towards Rin.

"Sorry, for making you worry too much."

Haruka said it in a voice that was barely audible. While slowly breathing out the air trapped in his chest, Rin felt his mood becoming lighter.

— Don't apologize. It's fine if you just swim the way you like.

Nodding his head with a smile, Rin replied to Haruka in silence.

That's how it was. Even if they struggled on their way to get here, it can't be helped. Makoto is looking at Rin, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows. Rin is reflected in Nagisa's transparent eyes. There's no need at all to hide it or fancy it up now. It's fine if he tells them with the intention of laying out the truth.

"Thanks, everyone. For going along with my selfishness this far."

As Rin says it, Makoto showed his usual smile.

"We're not really going along. We're all here because we want to be here."

"That's right. That's how it was."

It was unreasonable for Makoto to say that, and it made him feel bad. Making them go along with tough practice, he also got them to hold back from events other than the medley relay. So, of course he's grateful. So, of course he has to tell them. The truth—.

"There's something that I've been hesitant to say all along. The next race, it's the last even if we cry or smile. So before that, I still want to tell you. It's, the story of my pops...."

There, he cuts his words short once. The three of them were looking at Rin without saying anything.

Strengthening his resolve, Rin takes a deep breath. A long, long one, like before starting a dive.

"My dad was in the first generation of Iwatobi SC. There are photos displayed in the break room. Pops is in them."

It's the group photo they take every year in March. That endmost, oldest photo. The one with the boy holding the trophy and happily laughing in the middle.

"Apparently, Pops won the medley relay championship when he was in sixth grade. His dream for the future was to become an Olympic swimmer."

It's a really childlike dream. Laughably so. Like that, Rin tries to curl the corner of his lip, but it didn't turn into a smile that well.

"In the end, Pops couldn't become an Olympic swimmer, he became a fisherman."

He cuts his words. He hesitates on the next words. Makoto pulls together his eight-shaped eyebrows. Haruka narrows his eyes. Nagisa's throat moves a little.

Cheering up his heart that began to look down, Rin lifted his face.

"He became a fisherman..... and ended up sinking. I hear that it was in a place that wasn't even 3 km away from the fishing harbor."

A mute sound escaped from Makoto's throat.

"Haru....."

He looks at Haruka, like he's depending on him. Haruka looks back at Makoto. These two were able to have a conversation in silence. Most likely, they're confirming with each other what happened so many years ago.

Looking at that happen, Rin was able to confirm that those two from that time were Haruka and Makoto.

Haruka turns towards Rin with a grim expression.

"Did we.... meet?"

Rin nodded while lightly showing a smile.

"Seems so....."

He was walking while holding his sister's hand. The grieving figures of the people around

them were more painful than his father's passing. Suddenly, feeling someone's eyes on him, when he turns around, two children around the same age as him were motionlessly staring at Rin and the others. Firmly wiping his tears, when he stares back at them, the two had already run off to somewhere.

"Since when did you know?"

Haruka asks.

"When Haru fell in the river and was carried by the ambulance, Makoto held onto the edge of Haru's clothes all along."

Holding onto just the edge of his clothes, he kept calling Haruka's name while shaking.

"I thought that might be the case at that time. I thought so, looking at Makoto's hand gripping your clothes."

Haruka and Makoto look at each other. Then, they have a conversation in silence again.

Rin continued his story.

"I decided to go to Australia. After deciding that, I wanted to speak to Pops very much. To be honest, I don't even remember his face and I don't have a single memory of him left. When he went out fishing, since apparently he didn't come home for days, it's understandable....."

Haruka asks Rin.

"Did you speak to him?"

"I don't know. Not yet, probably..... I just thought that if I went to the same swimming club as Pops, after winning the championship in the medley relay, maybe I could, see the same dream. But that's unrelated to everyone, it's kinda embarrassing a little, so that's why I kept silent..... But I thought that I have to face you all up front, or we can't become a true team. It's a very selfish story, but I really thought so. I, with you all, I want to become a true... the best team!"

Rin's eyes heat up. Something hot flows out. He looks at Haruka with those eyes. He looks at Makoto. He looks at Nagisa. He thought that he doesn't mind even if he peeks into the depths of his eyes. He thought that he doesn't mind even if he exposes all of himself. If it's to these best teammates.

"The first time I called out. After I lost to Haruka. That time, I was kinda happy, that there's a fast guy at Iwatobi SC. Since I was just like you guys, I became strangely

curious, every time we met, I thought that we might make a good team. It's true."

Rin sniffled once.

"That's the reason. Thanks."

It was the reply to the question that Makoto had asked days before. That time when Rin said that he only wanted to swim in the relay, Makoto asked him why he was so obsessed with the relay, it's to that.....

Nagisa asked Rin, while rubbing his eyes that wore a new reddish tinge.

"But hey, the people at Sano SC who were your friends all along, aren't they mad?"

Wiping at the corner of his eyes once, Rin shows Nagisa a laugh.

"I got them to properly understand. Besides, it's better if I'm not on the same team as Sousuke."

"Sousuke's the person who swam with Rin-chan yesterday?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because we understand each other too well. He's even more theoretical than I am, we often quarreled. So, we settled on it that the faster way is always correct, but our competitive spirit wasn't half-baked anymore. It's a hard thing, being birds of a feather."

"Do you hate him?"

"I don't hate him. Rather, I still think of him as the person who understands me the most. But sometimes, it becomes difficult to be together..... When I end up understanding his feelings, I end up not being able to say the things that I want to. I can no longer seriously go up against him. That's not a friend, it's like an alter-ego, isn't it? You don't like or hate your alter-ego. Ending up like that, no longer thinking of them as a friend, it's really painful..... It's that swimming with nonsensical guys like you is more amusing. Though there's a lot of trouble, too. "

"What do you mean by nonsensical?"

"Like, a guy whose arms stretch right before the goal."

"Is that me?"

"Like, a guy who wastefully swims with all his power."

"That's Mako-chan, huh?"

"Like, a guy who does an unbelievable swimming once you think it's no use."

"Haru-chan was amazing, huh?"

"You guys really are a bunch of weirdos."

Raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto shows a carefree smile.

"There's a crybaby romanticist who speaks of his dream, too, huh?"

Rin wanted to answer something back to that, but thinking that it's just like that, his mouth opened into a broad smile.

He tries and thinks about what his father's teams was like. Since they won the championship, they were surely a good team, though.

—But hey, Pops. Sorry but this team is the best!

The announcement informing the beginning of the finals was heard in the locker room. The invisible thread of nervousness stretches around, while complicatedly entangling.

Equipping his goggles, Rin snapped the rubber.

"The last one settles it!"

"Yeah!"

While raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto sticks his chest out.

"All right!"

Nagisa makes a sound with the goggles' rubber, imitating Rin.

And, Haruka quietly emits the strong energy from his body.

It suddenly felt like the wind was blowing. It was a wind that contained the salt water's scent a little. He thought that it was quite similar to Mutsukibashi's wind. That wind blew through the locker room without a sound, as if it was inviting the four of them to the place of the finals.

"It's tomorrow, right?"

While lining up at the starting block, Sousuke talked to Rin from beside him. He's confirming that tomorrow is the day that he departs to Australia.

"Yeah, next is way ahead."

Rin replies that the next time they swim together will be way ahead.

"Then, gotta win today."

"That's how it is."

If he ends up losing today, he'll end up carrying that regret for many years to come. They mutually recognized that.

It was only that much of a conversation. The oath to certainly compete against each other again many years ahead was put into only that much of a conversation. It was a promise that meant that they'll only put in the strength of competing against each other. Just that much was enough.

Makoto waited for the starting signal, seizing his grip.

"Take your marks!"

—Silence—

Short buzzer sound.

Makoto leaps backwards. Then, landing on the water. The sensation of being roughly tasted by the large monster. The feeling that believes that the water is scary is still there. However, his body didn't cower anymore. Even if the 'fear' is still clinging to a corner of his heart, now the feeling of connecting to everyone had won. That feeling takes priority over everything else.

He mustn't run away anymore. He'll push forward to the limits of his strength. That's what his heart commands. There's no need at all to hesitate. Only to swim with all his power.

While rising to the surface, he commences the strokes. He narrows his eyes to the blueness of the sky. Even being indoors, even with his goggles on, he was able to feel the radiance of the sky. Makoto felt so good while swimming that he almost forgot that

he was in a race.

When he rises to the surface after making the turn, the shape of Makoto's splashes changed a little. Simultaneously, the scent of salt water wraps up his body. It was a strange sensation. No, it's not just a sensation. The things he sees with his eyes, the things he hears with his ears, all of it changed to the sea. Reflecting the blue sky filled with light, the rolling sea surface was peacefully creating a diffused reflection.

Makoto was swimming in the middle of a vast expanse of sea now.

It's been years since he last swam in the sea. However, there's no fear. He even thinks that it feels good. There's surely a monster in this water, too. There's no doubt about it, it's lurking at the bottom of the deep sea, and it'll soon be attacking Makoto.

However, there was something that Makoto had to do now. He had a mission to complete at any cost. To reach Haruka, Haruka and the others, faster than anyone else. If it's for the sake of that mission, no matter what kind of monster it may be, it wasn't worthy of fearing.

Kicking up the waves, Makoto became a marine animal. Striking his tail fin, bending his whole body, while powerfully brushing away the water, he pushes on. Faster, faster than any animal living in the sea.

—Reach!

Hitting the wall with his feelings packed into it, he shouts while raising his body.

"Go, Nagisa!"

Nagisa's body fluttering in midair, he makes the landing on the water at a beautiful angle. The water's surface as the border, the world surrounding Nagisa changes. Light and sound both, everything peacefully starts to sway. Then, Nagisa fully ascended to the height of simple thought. Just to the one point of swimming fast.

He kicks the mass of water with a heavy impact. Seizing the water, he rapidly pushes his way through. He turns his conscious towards forward, forward. He doesn't feel the exhaustion of his physical strength. He can still go. He can still swim. Like this, it feels like he could advance to anywhere.

He makes the turn, touching the surface of the wall with both hands. One pull, one kick.

Suddenly, he noticed that someone is swimming in front of him. They're in the same lane. He thinks that it's not possible, but somebody was definitely swimming. He tries to

turn his consciousness to who it may be. At that moment, feeling the emission of a strong energy, his chest became hot.

— It's Haru-chan!

There's no doubt about it. Haruka is swimming in front of him.

— Come and keep up.

Haruka says.

— Yeah, Haru-chan.

While thinking that he absolutely won't be separated, his arm stretches.

— You've gotten pretty fast, haven't you?

— Mako-chan.

Before he knew it, Makoto was swimming on Nagisa's right side.

— Really? I've gotten faster?

Rin comes lining up to him on the left side.

— You've practiced so much. It'd be strange if you hadn't gotten faster.

— Rin-chan.

— Well, you can't beat me, though.

— I can swim faster than Rin-chan.

— You're telling me, huh. Then try proving it.

— All right.

— You shouldn't try too hard, Nagisa. You have to loosen up more.

— But, we can't win unless I try my best, can we?

— Trying your best is fine, but you shouldn't put in futile strength.

— Haha, Mako-chan is always swimming with all his strength.

— I'm gonna leave you behind if you chatter.

— Ah, wait up. Haru-chan.

The wind that blew on Mutsukibashi pushes Nagisa from behind.

— How far are we going? Haru-chan.

— You know, of course. To the goal.

— Yeah!

Nagisa's arms stretch another stage. His body riding the water, acquiring even more lifting power, he accelerates. Glad that he's swimming together with everyone, he strongly feels that he wants to swim faster for this reason. Packing that feeling into it, he touched the wall.

"Rin-chan, good luck!"

Rin shoots out from the crouching start posture. He was even able to accurately measure the slight difference from Nagisa's touch to when his feet kick off from the starting block. The bizarre concentration that he felt in the earlier race visited Rin again. However, it doesn't bewilder him anymore. He doesn't lose sight of himself anymore. So calmly that it's surprising, he was able to judge the situation. There's no unnecessary nervousness or fighting spirit or anything at all. There was only the certain feeling that he wanted to connect to Haruka with the best swimming. Then, the concentration that has crossed its utmost limits makes Rin rapidly evolve.

Among the eight swimmers in the race, even now that he's fluttering in midair, he was able to accurately know who's in which position. He's landing on the water from his fingertips at the ideal angle. He even distinctly knew the shapes of the splashes rising. He feels it without seeing it with his eyes. He was able to count to the single fine bubble made underwater.

He commences the strokes from the dolphin kick. Catch, then keyhole pull. He doesn't even feel the smallest particle out of order. He was able to look down on his own form from right overhead. It's not an image. He's actually seeing it. Inside his retina, it tightly bound the picture. If he were to extend his field of vision, he can also see the form of everyone swimming right now. Just now, he was able to know without the tiniest bit of confusion even that Sousuke had made the start. It seems like he can even hear his breathing.

— Pops....

After the turn, those words suddenly passed by a corner of his mind. Perhaps Sousuke

would say to not think about unnecessary things when swimming. However, even without thinking about it, it steadily occupies his mind. It's not that he's making too much of it. As a certain truth, it wells up from the depths of his heart.

—Is Pops showing me this sight?

His chest getting hot, that temperature is conveyed to his arms, to his legs. Exceeding the ideal, a yet unseen world spreads out before his eyes. The future that's filled with light to the point of overflowing. Rin stretched his arms out towards the direction that light shines.

— I'll show you. The extraordinary sight, that can't be seen unless it's the four of us!

Rin's hand touches the surface of the wall. Then, lifting his face, he shouts to Haruka diving overhead.



"Haru!"

Haruka fluttered in midair while hearing Rin's voice. Even though he's a companion that irritates him so much, he feels an unusual pleasantness. Finding it strange for himself to be like that, he ends up smiling.

Making the landing on the water, he slips his body in. Without forcibly pressing it down or denying it. They're not becoming one body, nor is he excluding it. Accepting each other's existence, they recognize each other.

Detesting his self that relied on water, he attempted to be strong. The more he thinks about it like that, the water coils around him, heavily persisting, it attempted to snatch away his freedom like shackles. And yet, Haruka just recklessly swam, just moving his hands and feet blindly. Having long forgotten things such as feeling the water.

The result of that is in yesterday's race. It was a sensation like dropping into the abyss possessing an infinite deepness, to anywhere.

Just before the semifinals, when Nagisa talked to him, he thought about how he's reflected in those eyes. Nagisa was staring only at swimming faster, straight ahead, without doubting anything. His self reflected in those eyes was helplessly hesitating. Wavering with hesitation, he was wandering about. And, he was weakly seeking help.

If he keeps fighting against the existence called water like that, what will he see ahead? Or, if he starts depending on it again, is it something that he should honestly accept? Seeking help from someone, while attempting to rely on something, he was attempting to deny such a weak self.

—What are you doing?

In the earlier race, it's what he thought while watching Rin swim. And, these are words that he has also said to himself like that. Both depending on the water to heal his weak self and refusing the water to become strong, in the end, it was the same thing. Just as Nagisa keeps being like Nagisa, it's fine as long as he keeps being like himself. That was the light that he had found while aimlessly wandering in the dark, deep water.

A strong energy fills his body from within. He didn't intend to hold it back anymore. Makoto's feelings burn inside Haruka. Nagisa's feelings give wings to Haruka. Rin's feelings becoming the wind, it makes Haruka accelerate. He wasn't hesitant about anything anymore. He swims, just strongly believing in his feelings. That's all it was.

Inside his chest, the very depths of it helplessly begins to heat up. Just like a flame bursting out, his body gets hotter. The moment that sparkling splashes touched his body,

it all evaporates and disappears. His arms and legs burnt red are steadily heating up.

Before long, Haruka becoming a single ray of light, he pierced through the water with a dazzling high speed. He tremendously headed towards the goal in the distance.

Chapter Eight: Sakura

When you go around to the back of Iwatobi SC, there is a small garden, which could also be gazed from the poolside. In that rear garden, crowded with various kinds of trees planted, it showed a different look with each season. Beginning the maintenances such as cleaning and watering, as well as replanting and pruning, since all of it is done by the superintendent on his own, in a certain sense, it could also be said that this rear garden was developed according to the superintendent's tastes.

Its reputation was quite renowned that all year round, some sort of flowers blooming, it delighted the eyes of the people going to the club from beyond the glass. Red camellias in winter. From rape blossoms to azaleas in spring. The early summer hydrangeas, inflating like soap bubbles, bellflowers follow after them. The scent of autumn's fragrant olive was so vivid that it enveloped the poolside in it.

Now in particular, the rape blossoms' yellow is coloring the rear garden.

Rin and Nagisa, the three of them with Haruka, were waiting for Makoto in the rear garden.

"Hey, Rin-chan. What do you wanna do with burying something like a trophy?"

Nagisa asked.

"That's something the four of us won together, so wouldn't it be weird if one person took it home?"

"Then, what if we had it displayed in the club?"

The trophies and shields acquired individually from the competition can be kept individually, but if someone wishes to, getting the club to keep it safe, they could also get it to be placed in the display.

"It's fine. It's not something to show off to people. It's a trophy just for us. So, we're burying it as a proof of our friendship. Well, it's something like a time capsule."

"Then, will it stay buried forever?"

"No. Someday, the day will surely come when we have to remember what happened today, today's medley relay. When that day comes, we'll dig it up again."

"When's that?"

"Who knows. If it's five years or ten years later, we'll only know when it's that time."

The rear entrance's door opening, Makoto came out. He's holding the trophy and several gardening shovels in his hands.

"Sorry for the wait. I got the superintendent's permission. And I borrowed shovels, too."

Burying it arbitrarily, having it be discovered when the flowers are replanted, since they'd be in trouble if it was disposed of, they decided to get permission just in case.

Temporarily taking back the trophy and shield to the club, after the commemoration photographing, they decided to listen to each of their wishes. And then, Makoto took charge of it.

"All right. Then, shall we?"

Opening the bag he had left aside, Rin took out a big, empty cookie tin from inside it.

"You're amazing, Rin-chan. Are you always carrying that?"

Nagisa saying that, Rin is astonished.

"No way. Just today."

"Ah, by any chance, is it the one that your little sister Kou-chan brought—"

"Yeah. This."

"Whaaat. You should've left it."

"If I take it out with that timing, it would really make me 'luck-pusher', wouldn't it?"

Makoto asked while distributing the shovels.

"But hey, did you know from the start that we'll get a trophy?"

"That goes without saying, Makoto. Surely you didn't think that we can't win the championship?"

Rin opens the lid of the empty tin.

"It's not like that, but I just thought what amazing self-confidence you have."

Makoto hands over the trophy to Rin. With a size that can be handled with one hand, there's a relief in the shape of the starting posture in the top part, from a distance it looked like a bird spreading its wings.

When they try putting it in the cookie tin, it went into it exactly.

"Wow, it fits right in, huh?"

Nagisa is surprised.

"Of course it does. It's the same as last year."

Rin was also the champion in 50m breaststroke and free last year.

"So where did the superintendent say that we can bury it?"

While closing the lid, Rin asked Makoto.

"Around the lower part of the camellias."

"Which ones are the camellias?"

As Makoto and Rin are taking an extensive view of the rear garden after Nagisa asked, Haruka pointed his finger.

"That's it."

"You're amazing, Haru. You knew."

Makoto admires him, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"When the red flowers began to bloom, Yazaki told me."

Holding the shovel and the tin, Rin goes towards the camellias.

"All right, let's dig."

As Rin sticks the shovel into the earth, Makoto and Nagisa also began to dig in the same spot. However, the earth was unexpectedly hard, they can't dig through it as easily as they thought.

"Haru. Don't just watch, give us a hand."

As Rins says it, throwing aside the gardening shovel, Haruka went into the club through the rear entrance.

"Tsk, what a selfish guy."

Reluctantly, when the three of them are digging again, Haruka came back, carrying a large shovel.

"If you do it neatly with those, night's gonna fall."

Sticking the shovel into the ground right after he says it, forcibly stepping on it with his feet, he began to dig with a thudding sound. The gardening shovels completely getting their turn taken, the three of them ended up just gazing at Haruka's manner of digging.

Suddenly, Haruka's feet that was stepping on it, stopped.

"What happened? Haru."

Makoto asked.

"Something's there."

"What is it?"

Nagisa peeks at it.

".....A box?"

With the gardening shovel, Makoto cautiously tries to dig it up.

"This is a 'toolbox'. There was a preceding visitor, huh."

Rin peeks at it, too. The 'toolbox' was in a transparent vinyl bag.

"A name.... is written on it."

When Makoto brushes off the earth, the letters on it read 'Matsuoka Rin'.

"Me? Ah, this, it's what I used in kindergarten. But, why?"

As Rin is staring at the box, Haruka spoke.

"You'll know if you try opening it."

".....Yeah."

Digging up the box, taking off the vinyl, Rin tries to open the lid. There were four gold medals inside it.

Nagisa peeks at it from beside Rin.

"'18th' is written on it, huh."

"This year is the 41st, uh, that's 23 years ago, huh."

"__"

As Makoto says it, Rin stands up seizing the medal and began to run to the club's rear entrance. Opening the door and going inside, crossing through the lobby like that, he ran all the way to the break room that has the photographs of the successive generations of members displayed in it. Then, he stands in front of the oldest photograph at the very end. On the medal hanging on the neck of the boy holding the trophy and laughing, the letters read '18th'. He compares it with the medal in his hand. Without a doubt—.

".....Pops."

Tears roll down Rin's cheek.

That box wasn't buried 23 years ago. It's after Rin enters elementary school that he stopped using the 'toolbox'. And by that time, his father was gone. In other words, the other three must have buried it. The proof of a friendship sworn for eternity.... perhaps.

".....Pops."

After muttering it again, Rin quickly wiped away the tears with his left hand.

After that, they decided to bury the cookie tin with the trophy in it beside the 'toolbox'.

The cherry blossom had small flower buds on it. With the way they shook in the wind, it had become quite distinctly clear that they've already become soft. In three more days, they'll surely start blooming. Like they were impatiently waiting for that time, the flower buds wholly took in the spring sunshine. At the base of the cherry blossom, surrounded by the bricks turned reddish-brown, multicolored flowers are blooming one step ahead.

"It hasn't bloomed yet after all."

Rin says it without sounding that regretful.

"That's why Mako-chan said so. Of course it's too early."

Without meaning to scold him, Nagisa says it somehow funnily.

"But hey, I'm seeing it for the last time today, so I wanted to see it no matter what."

Rin was adoringly gazing at the flower buds one by one.

"But look, the flower bed's flowers are blooming. What kind of flower is this? Zaki-chan."

Squatting down, Makoto stretches his hand towards the flower. The scarf stained light brown swaying in the wind, Aki also squatted down beside Makoto.

"A pansy, I think. Probably. Actually, I don't really know either."

Saying that, she laughs. There was one more flower that bloomed.

Nagisa squatted down beside Aki. Then, discovering the messages written on the brick, one by one, he reads them out aloud.

"Friend", 'Peace', 'Smile', 'love', 'Thank you'. Hey, which one is Mako-chan's?" [the ones in italics are originally in English]

Being asked by Nagisa, Makoto started to search for his.

"I wonder where? Uh, ah, this one."

It was right beside Nagisa's foot. Nagisa tries reading the letters written on the one he's pointing his finger at.

"It's in English. 'I swim'. It means swimming?"

"That's right. It means 'I swim'."

"Mine is next to it."

"Eh?"

When Aki points to it, Makoto raised his eight-shaped eyebrows, seeming a little surprised.

Nagisa reads it out loud.

"It's in English again. 'Best'. I know this one. It means 'best', right?"

Aki nodding, she points her finger to the brick beside it.

"Beside mine is Nanase-kun's."

"Free'. Aah, it's free, isn't it?"

Rin points his finger from behind.

"Mine's beside it."

"For The Team'. Team.....? What does it mean?"

"It means 'for the team', but it seems like too much of a coincidence. All four are in English, and it's kind of lined up like a phrase."

There were other bricks written in English, and it wasn't strange that some were accidentally lined up either, but it obviously feels intentional.

Aki laughed mischievously.

"I lined them up. When I was carrying the bricks to Nanase-kun, after seeing the message, I thought it was amusing. But it's really a coincidence that they ended up connecting like a phrase. It's a little surprising."

Folding his arms, Rin closes his eyes.

"This isn't a coincidence. It's fate."

To that exaggerated way of speaking, Makoto and Nagisa look at each other and burst out laughing.

"Rin-chan, you're like a terrible actor."

"Hey.....!"

When Rin turned to face Nagisa to say something back to him, Aki began to read out loud everyone's messages.

"I Swim Best Free For The Team."

Aki's voice that seemed like it's speaking to the pansy, flows alongside the spring breeze.

Rin, who missed his chance to complain to Nagisa, taking a single breath, brought a smile to his face.

"It somehow sounds like good words. It feels perfect for the current us."

While bringing his face closer to the bricks, Makoto tilts his neck.

"But is this really a proper phrase?"

Rin and Aki tilted their necks, too.

"Well....."

Suddenly, Nagisa points his finger at a yellow flower.

"Look. See, over there."

"Eh, where?"

Makoto and Aki look in the direction that Nagisa is pointing his finger in.

"See, inside that yellow flower."

Being told that, when the two of them bring their faces closer, there was an insect inside the flower. Its black and yellow striped abdomen can be seen. When they realized that it's a honeybee, it was at the same time that the honeybee flew out.

"Oh!"

"Eek!"

Makoto and Aki moved away from the flower bed, reflexively jumping back. However, innocently stopping at the next flower, the honeybee starts collecting nectar again.

Looking at the two of them like little children, Nagisa laughed.

"It's okay. You two are scaredy cats, huh? See."

Holding out both his hands, without leaving time to hold his breath, Nagisa caught the honeybee.

While pointing his finger at the honeybee inside Nagisa's hands, Rin says in a panic.

"O-oi, it's a bee. That."

"I know. Is Rin-chan scared, too?"

"No, that's not it. Hurry up and let it loose."

While giggling, Nagisa held out his closed hands towards Haruka's face.

"Is Haru-chan scared, too?"

"No."

Just expressionlessly, without even stirring, Haruka was fixedly looking at his hands. When Nagisa slowly opens his hands, the honeybee was crawling around with small movements, perhaps searching for nectar in his palms. Before long, when it moves its wings like it remembered how to, it flew away, grazing Haruka's cheek.

After Haruka saw the bee off, he slowly moved his gaze to Rin.

"Did you get to meet your father?"

Haruka utters the same words that Sousuke did at that time.

"Aah, well yeah. What about you? Were you able to see a great sight?"

"Probably yeah."

Makoto raises his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"I was able to see it, too. But it was kinda strange."

Nagisa spreads a whole-faced smile.

"Me too! It was a really good feeling."

His voice resounds, filling the vast schoolyard. Though it was Sunday, there was no one else there other than the five of them. A little while later when the flowers of the cherry blossom would bloom profusely, this schoolyard would be overflowing with the voices of new children again.

Aki breathed in the air that smelled like spring, filling up her chest.

"But, isn't it amazing? Winning the championship so easily. What with a new tournament record, really, it's amazing."

Imitating Aki, Makoto also tries breathing in the air. It faintly had the scent of salt water.

"Zaki-chan and the others, you properly got a bronze medal, didn't you? It's amazing."

Nodding, Aki affirms that they're amazing.

"You know, I might've come to like swimming a little more again."

Folding his arms, Rin nods. Makoto smiles, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows. Saying that he thinks so, too, Nagisa looks at Haruka. Haruka was looking up at the sky. With a distant gaze, as if he was seeking the end of the sky.

"Rin."

Haruka calling Rin's name, time stopped just for a moment. Makoto and Aki look at Haru. Then, Rin, who was called by his first name, replies like he's amused.

"What is it?"

"Are you going to pursue your father's dream?"

"I don't know. Not yet."

Even if they don't know yet, even if they can't see the goal, they can dash with all their

strength for the sake of searching for it. That's the privilege that was bestowed upon them.

The cherry blossom's branches made a sound. As they turn around, the wind was blowing. That wind crossing over Haruka and the others, while wearing the spring's sunshine, it runs through the schoolyard. And when it accelerates again, it soared into the skies.

To the distant future, inviting them along.

Afterword

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who has taken my work into their hands. Having received the honorable mention in the "2nd Kyoto Animation Award" contest, I remember it like something from long ago. Never dreaming that it would be published like this at that time, I just have a thousand emotions flooding my heart now.

When participating in talks for the publication, the first thing I thought was 'I can meet Haruka and the others again'. When I turned the pages of the manuscript after it's been a while, they released their glittering radiance, their surging liveliness unchanged as well. Calling out 'Yo, take care of us again', Haruka fleetingly turned his gaze towards me, with the usual blunt expression on his face.

Sixth grade elementary school students are right in the delicate period when an adult-like way of thinking starts sprouting and as seniors, they come to have a sense of responsibility and a sense of self-reliance as an individual person. They, who've realized that they cannot stay as children, anguishing in hesitation and bewilderment, that anguish makes their heart grow.

Even if they're playing sports, even if they're studying, even when they're playing, even when they're crying, even if they're just standing without doing anything, they are brightly shining.

Having thought that I wanted to depict them who are like that was the motive. Then, when I thought of making it a story about swimming, I began to write one more line.

"The water is alive."

With this outset, the story's direction was mostly decided. The concept is 'the story of swimmers who'll be called prodigies in the future, before they've awakened yet'. The theme is 'through swimming, depicting the friendship and growth of the boys'. I thought of the setting and composition while writing. It was an unreasonable way of doing it, but I had the confidence to finish writing it. The power to make me believe just that was in this 'one line'.

Then, when I was finished with writing it all, the message packed into the work finally came into sight, as if it was rising to the surface. Such as 'Aah, so it was this sort of thing that I wanted to say.', while thinking of it as if it's someone else's work, I gazed at the work that was just finished.

The message must possess a universality that isn't affected by the changes of the period

and the circumstances. Because, that's why it's something that reveals a person's true nature.

As to what that is, I venture to leave it unspoken. There's no answer. The answer is what everyone felt. If you can't feel anything from it, that is the author's lack of ability. If most of the people who have taken my work into their hands each felt something, nothing makes me happier.

In the future, I feel that I want to send out more works into the world that makes even more people feel even more things.

In closing, I would like to deeply express my gratitude to everyone who has given their assistance for the publication.

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